

# NEW REPUBLIC

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A SPECIAL ISSUE ON  
HIGHER EDUCATION

## ACTIVISTS AND ACADEMICS

STUDENTS & TEACHERS & SEX

LAW SCHOOL RADICALS

TRIGGER WARNING MYTHS

BLACK DIGITAL INTELLIGENTSIA

SAUL BELLOW'S DOWNFALL

THE COST OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL





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**Blake Bailey** is the author of *The Splendid Things We Planned: A Family Portrait*. In his salad days as a small-time book reviewer in Florida, he said he tried to mimic the “wry Olympian detachment” of Gore Vidal. “I like to think I’m no longer very Olympian—both for better and for worse.” **AN INSATIABLE EGOIST, P. 80**

**Stacia L. Brown** has been, in no particular order, a professor, tutor, blogger, editor, author, and cultural critic. She said she cut her hair “on a whim” last summer and didn’t expect to “feel the emotional weight.” Since she started growing an Afro, friends assure her it’s only a matter of time before a white person tries to touch it. **MY HAIR, MY POLITICS, P. 16**

**Michelle Dean** is working on a book about female critics and intellectuals of the twentieth century. Her interest in writers’ drinking habits was first piqued while working as a research assistant on D.T. Max’s biography of David Foster Wallace, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, which introduced her to Alcoholics Anonymous’s ubiquitous rhetoric of recovery. **DRUNK CONFESSIONS, P. 56**

**Michael Eric Dyson**, a contributing editor at the **NEW REPUBLIC**, is University Professor of Sociology at Georgetown. He credits the rising generation he defines as the black digital intelligentsia with teaching him how to be engaged in the digital era. Now, he hopes “to defend them against some of the sneering, unkind remarks or snobbish thoughts in certain quarters of the academy.” **THINK OUT LOUD, P. 30**

**Aaron R. Hanlon** is an assistant professor of English at Colby College. His recent move from Georgetown to the small liberal arts college in Maine inspired him to grapple with how trigger warnings play into the “intellectual care” of his students. **THE TRIGGER WARNING MYTH, P. 52**

**Stephen Kent Johnson** is a photographer whose work has appeared in *Martha Stewart Living*, *Gather Journal*, and *Anthology Magazine*. Shooting this issue’s shadowy still lifes was a labor of love alongside stylist Angharad Bailey. They debated eight different busts for the cover image, searched for the perfect megaphone, and accidentally shattered an entire piece of glass while attempting to only crack it.

**Evan Kindley** was so obsessed with Lewis Carroll as a child that he attended a scholarly conference about the writer when he was eleven years old. “I’m sure I was the youngest person there by 30 years,” he said. Now a senior editor at the Los Angeles Review of Books, Kindley has so far resisted adding commentary to Carroll’s work on Genius.com, dabbling instead in rap lyric marginalia. **DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE, P. 76**

**Laura Miller** is the author of *The Magician’s Book: A Skeptic’s Adventures in Narnia* and a co-founder of Salon. While researching student-professor romances, she ran across a star-studded example: Stanley Edgar Hyman wooed student Shirley Jackson after reading her article in the student newspaper. Their meeting “seems really romantic,” Miller said, but after they married, his affairs with a host of other students “really tormented her.” **LUST FOR LEARNING, P. 18**

**Correction:** In our Sept/Oct issue, the photo of Louis “Tex” Park featured in Jen Percy’s “At War in the Garden of Eden” incorrectly stated that he was at a peshmerga base near Tal Afar. He was actually at a Christian safe house in Dohuk. In the same issue, Sarah Marshall’s “Modern Magdalenes” stated that Northern Ireland passed legislation criminalizing both prostitutes and the prostituted. It was only the prostitutes.

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“WHEN INTELLECTUALS can do nothing else,” Irving Howe wrote 25 years after founding the socialist quarterly *Dissent*, “they start a magazine.” Yet as he recognized: “Starting a magazine is also doing something.” For Howe, the worlds of politics and letters were necessarily entwined. A committed socialist, political activist, and editor, he was also an English professor who championed Yiddish literature in his writings on Isaac Babel and Isaac Bashevis Singer. His work appeared in the *NEW REPUBLIC* for six decades, on topics ranging from Robert Frost to Richard Nixon. Howe was never one to stay out of a fight: Born in 1920, he learned the art of rhetoric by speaking on the soapboxes of New York City’s outer boroughs. After the publication in 1976 of his seminal book on Eastern European Jews in America, *The World of Our Fathers*, a reader criticized him for not including mothers. “‘World of Our Fathers’ is a title,” he replied tersely. “‘World of Our Mothers and Our Fathers’ is a speech.” His acerbic wit and intellectual conviction are on show in this essay defending the literary canon in the midst of the culture wars—a debate still playing out in academia today.



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## Irving Howe

# The Value of the Canon

FEBRUARY 18, 1991

Of all the disputes agitating the American campus, the one that seems to me especially significant is that over “the canon.” What should be taught in the humanities and social sciences, especially in introductory courses? What is the place of the classics? How shall we respond to those professors who attack “Eurocentrism” and advocate “multiculturalism”? ...

Here, roughly, are the lines of division. On one side stand (too often, fall) the cultural “traditionalists,” who may range politically across the entire spectrum. Opposing them is a heterogeneous grouping of mostly younger teachers, many of them veterans of the 1960s, which includes feminists, black activists, Marxists, deconstructionists, and various mixtures of these.

At some colleges and universities traditional survey courses of world and English literature, as also of social thought, have been scrapped or diluted. ... What replaces them is sometimes a mere option of electives, sometimes “multicultural” courses introducing material from Third World cultures and

thinning out an already thin sampling of Western writings, and sometimes courses geared especially to issues of class, race, and gender. ...

I grew up with the conviction that what George Lukacs calls “the classical heritage of mankind” is a precious legacy. It came out of historical circumstances often appalling, filled with injustice and outrage. It was often, in consequence, alloyed with prejudice and flawed sympathies. Still, it was a heritage that had been salvaged from the nightmares, occasionally the glories, of history, and now we would make it “ours,” we who came from poor and working-class families. ...

By invoking the “classical heritage of mankind” I don’t propose anything fixed and unalterable. Not at all. There are, say, seven or eight writers and a similar number of social thinkers who are of such preeminence that they must be placed at the very center of this heritage; but beyond that, plenty of room remains for disagreement. All traditions change, simply through survival. Some classics die. Who now reads Ariosto? A loss, but losses form part of tradition too. And

new arrivals keep being added to the roster of classics—it is not handed down from Mount Sinai or the University of Chicago. It is composed and fought over by cultivated men and women. In a course providing students a mere sample of literature, there should be included some black and women writers who, because of inherited bias, have been omitted in the past. ...

What is being invoked here is not a stuffy obeisance before dead texts from a dead past, but rather a critical engagement with living texts from powerful minds still very much “active” in the present. And we should want our students to read Shakespeare and Tolstoy, Jane Austen and Kafka, Emily Dickinson and Leopold Senghor, not because they “support” one or another view of social revolution, feminism, and black self-esteem. They don’t, in many instances; and we don’t read them for the sake of enlisting them in a cause of our own. We should want students to read such writers so that they may learn to enjoy the activity of mind, the pleasure of forms, the beauty of language—in short, the arts in their own right. 🐼



## I Tried to Build My Perfect Quantified Self

With charts and data—and a narrative.

**I LOST 100 POUNDS** once thanks to a database. This was before the “quantified self” movement, and there were no Fitbits or Fuel Bands to rely on, so I had to devise my own solution. I built a web site that let me observe every calorie and total up how much I’d eaten, and exercised, throughout the day. On good days I would stay under 2,100 calories (adjusted for exercise expenditures), and on bad ones I’d get a cautionary red number to tell me that I’d crossed the threshold. It worked really well, until it didn’t. I named it ohlih.com: One Huge Lesson in Humility.

I built that site six years ago. My life had gone pretty sour. My career was stalled, and my wife and I were, after years of trying, still unable to have children. I was drinking a bottle of wine a day, smoking, too, and I couldn’t get my eating under control. I must have gotten near 400 pounds, although who knows—when you’re up that far you don’t jump on a scale too often. One night, I looked at some pictures

of myself on Facebook from a Fourth of July party. I’d gotten into some pie that evening and felt guilty about my second helpings. It seemed to me that I was simply a vehicle for the expression of a multitude of compulsions. More specifically, my true self, whoever that person was, had been lost—all filling, no crust.

I read articles, web sites, and books in search of expert guidance. This was depressing. No matter how I tried to lose weight I would be letting some people down. The fat-acceptance folks were sure it was oppression that kept me from celebrating my fleshly self. They wrote essays about the politics of airplane seats and “health at every size.” For them, dieting was counterrevolutionary. The new-agier types talked up colonics and cleanses. I considered these but my imagination overwhelmed me. Some doctors seemed to be saying that weight loss was basically impossible. Others recommended therapy before reduction. The Atkins bubble had popped so I wouldn’t be trapped in a purgatory of steak. The burgeoning paleo movement advocated for pork chops and greens. And everyone agreed that the caloric model of nutrition was a cultural disaster, a great lie—that food was more than numbers. My body was a battlefield.

Calories, even if wrong, I could understand. I knew how to program a computer, so I went with calories, with the thesis that although I couldn’t manage myself from moment to moment, a machine could. So I built the site. I used the programming language Python and wrote some code using a framework called Django (named for the musician) that makes it very easy to construct a database.

To create the kind of application I wanted required a firm definition of my model of the world. This is good. Simple. Everything could be divided into events and energy. Breakfast, for example, was an event, during which I’d add energy to my body, in the form of pancakes or eggs or, as was increasingly likely, high-fiber cereal with skim milk. Every food that I added to my database was an energy source, and I assigned it a certain number of calories. Riding a bicycle, meanwhile, was an event, one for which I’d use the energy in my body; I associated it with a negative number (–500 calories per hour). After each event, I’d hurry to a computer and log what happened. This was my system.

I designed the look of the site to resemble an eighteenth-century sales receipt. The homepage was decorated with a cherub, and for my font I used Hoefler Text, which has a sort of late-Enlightenment vibe to it—very serified. I am an inveterate creator of content management systems, so I added in two more functions: the ability to upload an image every day—a black-and-white photograph that I planned

ILLUSTRATION BY RACHEL LEVIT

to take with my cell phone—and the ability to add notes and thoughts to a given event.

The process of calorie-estimation involved lots of research, checking web sites, guessing which of the divergent caloric estimates was the most correct. Sometimes I'd just get a bag of pretzels and write down the information from the back of the bag. Not eating the whole bag was hard. Impossible at times. But the key was to count, and count honestly.

And to my shock, where nothing else had worked, this did. Eventually I began to build up a statistical portrait of myself. The best description of my tastes would be: bachelor food. I liked a specific style of sausage links—industrially flavored chicken protein in a casing that can be served on a bed of peas and eaten every night, flavored with pepper. I tracked every calorie. I rode

I'm offering myself up as a  
cautionary tale about data:  
It changed everything for me,  
but then it stopped working.

my bike to work. And I wrote a little every day. And put up a picture, too—sometimes of food, sometimes of some city vista, sometimes scenes from the fertility clinic, eventually pictures of my pregnant wife and our twins. My doctor began to smile when he saw me, which was remarkable. No doctor had ever smiled at me before. I bought a medical scale and moved the sliders every day.

(My brother has some of the same problems I do, and once, when his doctor pointed out that he'd gained weight, my brother said, "But doctor, I did it safely: one pound a week.")

I had it all: charts, graphs, a system, blood pressure dropping into a healthy range, a love for a bicycle. The pounds came off and they stayed off—for a while. I can't pinpoint when it all went south. After a couple years, the weight crept back on, not all of it, but an awful lot. Lots of things have happened to me. I had the twins, which cut into my bike-riding. I like to joke that I still need to lose my pregnancy weight. And now, four years later, I'm giant again. Every now and then I do my damndest to get back in there and track calories, but I can't bring myself to write about what I'm feeling. And I stopped uploading pictures. The site is just a few sporadic updates about sausages and cereal, and not much else. Numbers and meals.

All of this has made me incredibly empathetic to the tools of the quantified self, the little devices that have sprouted around the world—step trackers, wristbands, smart sneakers that connect to your phone—the technology that people use to count steps and track their calories. I've tried a few of them because I'd love to get back on the wagon.

But they're not for me. They lack the capacity for narrative. A chart is not a story. And at least for now, I don't have it in me to reenter my system and write about my thoughts and ideas. I've watched friend after friend show up with black buttons affixed to their lapels, with liquid-crystal readouts. I've watched them download calorie trackers and do all manner of tracking. And I've also watched, with total sympathy, as they flamed out. And so I'm offering myself up as a cautionary tale about data: It changed everything for me, but then it stopped working.

I went back and looked at some of the things I wrote while I was losing weight; now that I've gained much of it back, the person who was riding his bike 50 miles at a time feels like a stranger. Here's what I wrote in November 2012, when I was still deeply invested in this long diet:

My life was placed in amber when I started to lose weight. I *stopped* living it and became an observer. Work became confusing, relationships changed because I could no longer define them in familiar terms of food and drink. ... It all came at a price, and I am now at least somewhat an impostor. ... Writing everything down, externalizing the internal process of appetite management, *cyborgizing* so that I could alter and edit myself at a slight remove. ... This is a different life, one in which basic physical processes have become less about what feels good and more about information. ... Weight loss—the self-improvement industry in general—is a kind of natural, physical postmodernism. You become the text you are editing, rewrite your feelings, the body.

The counting of calories was essential, a way to understand the texture of my existence—food and sweat and so forth. A big part of what worked was the measurement, imperfect as it might be, of what was too much. For some reason related to my fundamental wiring, when I hit that line I always cross it. So having that number go from black to red was a way to know that I'd let myself slip. Some days I crossed over, but for a while there, I stayed on the dark, calm side of that line.

But nothing yet has given me the answer to why I stopped. I loved losing weight; I loved being more fit. I hate that the weight crept back. But it did, and anyone who would sneer at me for lack of willpower is welcome to walk a mile in my size-44 trousers. What I've been wrestling with now that I no longer quantify myself is why I don't want to write the stories and take the pictures that made my diet blog compelling. I think it's because it's too detailed a mirror. I'm not in denial about the calories, or the snacking, or the judgments of the scale. I just don't want to tell that story any more. And until I'm willing to I don't know how I'm going to get better. 🐻



## Market Correction

The fragile balancing act of creating a great public food market.

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**“YOU COULD DO** surgery back there,” Andy Pollock said, pointing to the five prep sinks in his 200-square-foot stall in the new Boston Public Market, the country’s only year-round covered food market with a mandate to sell foods made almost entirely from locally grown ingredients. Getting the market open this July was a 14-year effort that involved raising \$9 million in private funds, winning over state and local officials to provide \$6.5 million in buildings and benefits, and lining up more than 35 local businesses willing to take their chances that they would have enough goods to sell—and customers to buy them—during the interminable Boston winter.

Pollock had gone to great lengths in anticipation of the first cold season: He planted extra salad greens in his 30,000-square-foot greenhouses and extra winter squashes and potatoes at Silverbrook Farm, in the idyllic coastal town of Dartmouth, Massachusetts, an hour and a half from Boston. But like the market’s chocolatiers, juice pressers, bakers, tea brewers, pastrami smokers, and mozzarella makers frantically unpacking crates and trying to make display cases stay cold, he was concentrating on getting through the next seven hours. Then the Boston Inspectional Services officers bearing clipboards would approve his stand, or wouldn’t, in time for an opening reception for many of the people who had

gone to community hearings, sat through design and planning meetings, sifted through hundreds of vendor applications, given large donations, and stuffed flyers into envelopes.

As any regular farmers’ market visitor knows, a good market is about more than buying food—it’s about striking up conversations, exchanging information, feeling part of a community and actively contributing to it. Along with subways and buses, a public food market is one of the only places left for people of different economic classes to encounter one another, and even ... strike up a conversation.

A true market has as much rutabaga, bargain-priced chicken thighs, chunks of cheese, fruits, vegetables, and fish collars as it does, say, bean-to-bar chocolate from Taza—a company in nearby Somerville that has rightly won a national reputation and customer base—and superior hand-pulled mozzarella, like the one made with local milk at Wolf Meadow Farm, in Amesbury. Not everyone can pay \$9 for half a hand-cured pastrami sandwich from Maine grass-fed beef on hand-cut rye bread from Boston’s best baker, Clear Flour, even if I admit to being thrilled that the brand-new Beantown Pastrami is trying to make pastrami in long-deprived Boston. The sinks, vents, ADA-compliant ramps, and the like virtually mandate selling prepared foods. A few too many gourmet grilled-cheese vendors, though, with their higher margins, can soon turn a high-minded populist market into a food court.

Thus the collision course so many other public markets have set, or found, themselves on: either precious and overpriced boutique collections, hokey theme parks two steps more “local” than Knott’s Berry Farm, or down-at-the-heels wholesalers that look little different from the car-part shops on the same block. Boston Public Market is trying to achieve an elusive balance: pleasing the people who now consider artisanal, local food to be a basic human right, and people who just need to get dinner on the table.

Take those five sinks (one each for hand washing, food prep, vegetable washing, rinsing, and sanitizing knives and cutting boards), a somewhat extreme extension of the public health measures introduced for food markets by, among others, the pushcart-hating Mayor Fiorello La Guardia to get vermin-attracting peddlers off the New York City streets. Without those sinks, Silverbrook wouldn’t be able to offer samples of sliced tomatoes, because the knives used to cut them might pick up bacteria from cutting watermelon radishes if they are not washed. (Don’t even think of those times you popped yellow cherry tomatoes or Kentucky wonder beans into your mouth straight from the crate—do

you have any idea of the risks you were taking?) This is one of the reasons farmers' markets are so often in parks and parking lots rather than actual buildings.

Real success for Boston will mean appealing to many kinds of people: the tourists who clog Quincy Market just next door; the office workers from the adjacent financial district; the subway riders who use the four nearby stops; and, to my mind the most necessary group, the people who flock every Friday and Saturday to the open-air Haymarket for dirt-cheap, middling-quality, not-so-fresh, seldom-local produce and meat. Haymarket's "success needs to be our success," Liz Morningstar, the Boston Public Market's CEO, told her board soon after taking the job two years ago. She did not want to turn a cold brick shoulder to the non-artisan shoppers, including those who rely on food stamps, just outside her doors.

Idealistic inclusiveness, then, is much harder to put into practice than to write into a fund-raising prospectus or architect's program. Equipping vendors to take Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) isn't as easy as it sounds, Morningstar told me. Honey, for instance, is popular with Asian customers, including ones who pay with SNAP, and Chinatown is just one neighborhood over. But a local specialist like the Boston Honey Company is ineligible to take SNAP if it doesn't sell the USDA's full "market basket" of foods. Morningstar went through bureaucratic hoops to act as a clearinghouse for vendors so that customers can use SNAP for every eligible product at the market; each stand selling produce participates in Bounty Bucks, a Boston city program that matches up to \$10 a day for SNAP purchases of fresh produce from farm vendors.

Watching the Boston Public Market come to life over its first few weeks was like watching a seesaw seeking equilibrium. I had fresh in mind an example of a market that sinks, or maybe rises, to the wrong end: Union Market, just past a neighborhood of luxury-condo mid-rises in northeast Washington, D.C., that seems to have sprung up from a razed wasteland. The market looks like the backdrop of a cosmetics ad: a gorgeous brick factory-style building on the site of a historic market rebuilt after a fire and painted bright white, with one scarily shiny and all-too-kempt food boutique beside another.

It's one and a half blocks from a wholesale market of unkempt low brick buildings with heavily padlocked metal storefront gates. On the Saturday I visited, I saw families patiently waiting in a line that snaked through the aisles and out the doors of a large meat store selling big cuts of lamb, beef, goat, and fish, almost all of them frozen. After they paid, they waited again to have their cuts re-butchered by several workers with band saws. Every person in line was a person of color. Many didn't speak English. It was a picture both captivating and deeply disturbing: There was no apparent overlap between old and new. Union Market might as well have imported its own microclimate from Georgetown.

I'm aware of the counterargument to neighbors who fear gentrification and think seediness should be preserved for its own sake. Just now a battle is going on between longtime

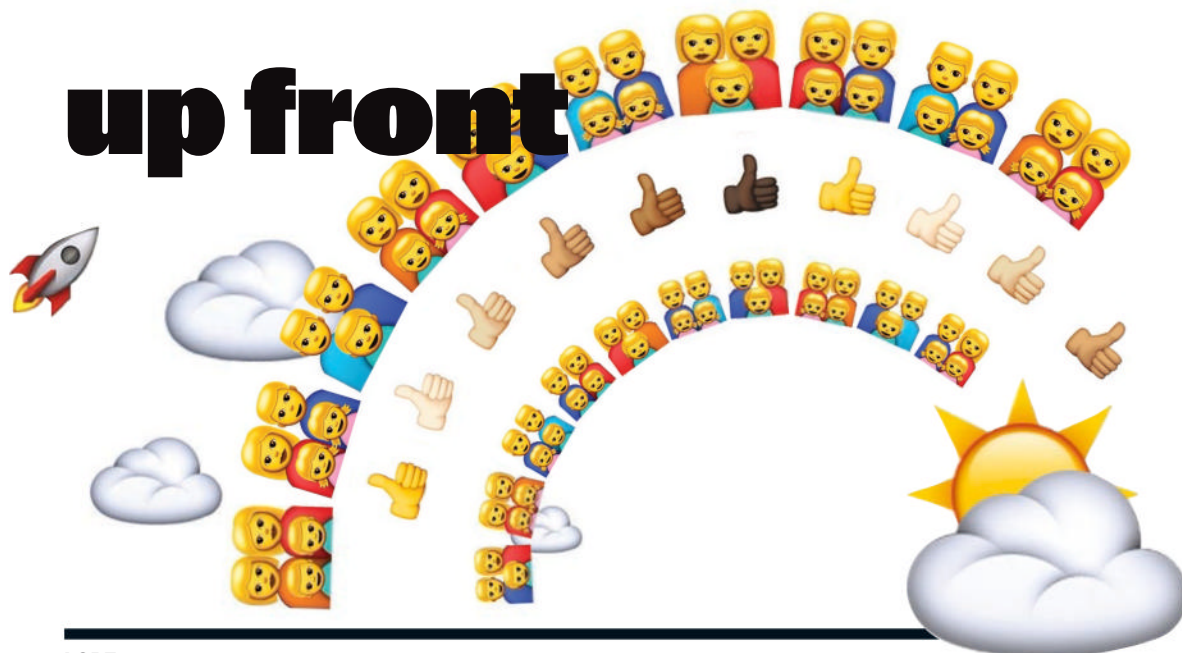
residents of St. Roch, the New Orleans neighborhood where two young white developers, neither of them born in the city, are reviving the nineteenth-century market of the same name, which sat empty for the decade after Hurricane Katrina. Concerned activists say residents won't be able to afford to shop at the glossy new stands. A longtime neighbor of the market

A true market has as much  
chicken thighs and fish  
collars as bean-to-bar  
chocolate and hand-pulled  
mozzarella.

recently told me he's thrilled a spot he grew up near and remembers as a ramshackle, dangerous place will be given new life. "You know who loves the new market?" he asked me. "Poor people! They want a nice place to shop, too!"

Mess, swept up at the end of every day, is part of what makes markets real. Grit should be part of the planning. Gray, low-ceilinged, crowded Boston Public Market already has it. And grit is what makes Essex Street, on the Lower East Side, my favorite market. There's a mix of upscale sellers (two of the best cheesemongers in the country, Saxelby and Formaggio Kitchen), artisans (the bright youngish Greek woman who left a law firm to bake pastries), the matchlessly idiosyncratic Shopsin's restaurant, and bodega-style produce vendors that have lousy signage and look unchanged since the late '70s. It's what makes Reading Terminal Market, in Philadelphia, so authentic, even if it's authentically kitschy and the ratio of prepared to fresh food is too high, as it is at the similarly kitschy Fairfax "Original Farmers Market" in Los Angeles. Ferry Building Marketplace, on San Francisco's Embarcadero, veers too much toward Union Market indoors for my taste, but the farmers' market in the back, happily chaotic and brilliantly diverse, rescues it from the precious. Perhaps the most successful and authentically charming market in the country is Cleveland's West Side Market: Built in 1912 and adorned with Guastavino tiles in the style of Grand Central Terminal, it's home to sausage makers, bakers, and non-quiet local food vendors.

The line between planned character and sterile perfection can be narrow. Of the markets I've seen, the one that stands the best chance of hitting that balance by design rather than serendipity is Boston. But maybe I'm partisan because I'm like my New Orleans friend: I want a nice place to shop. Just not too nice, please. 🐷



LGBT

## The New Nuclear Family

What gay marriage means for the future of parenthood.

BY **SUZY KHIMM**

**JUST DAYS AFTER** Shawn Davis and Richard Sawyers were married in September 2011, they started planning to have kids. “You started asking fast,” Davis said, looking over at his husband. “Was it even on the honeymoon?”

“I think it was,” Sawyers replied, recalling their time in Venice. We were sitting on the couch of their home in Washington, D.C., in Brightwood, near the border of Maryland. Their two-year-old son, Levi, whom they adopted at birth, was napping upstairs.

The two had talked about parenthood for years before their honeymoon and had even taken a workshop that laid out the different paths to becoming parents: private adoption, public foster-care adoption, surrogacy. But for Sawyers, tradition mattered. “It was important to be married and to be a family unit—I wanted that to happen first,” he said.

The same was true for the Wesoleks, whom I met on the steps of the Supreme Court in June on the day that gay marriage became legal nationwide. “Other people do it in different orders, but for us it was get married, buy a house, have a baby,” Danielle Wesolek told me. She and her wife, Amy Wesolek, moved to Maryland, got two Boston terriers, and then had their daughter, Lena, who’s now 18 months old.

The landmark ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* paves the way for other same-sex couples to follow their lead. Most states permit only married couples or unmarried individuals to adopt, and some have laws that give married couples preference. If couples want to hire a surrogate to carry their child, many states require that they be hitched.

Prior to the Supreme Court’s decision, the path to parenthood for gay couples was much more complicated. In states that prohibited same-sex marriage, couples could pursue single-parent adoption. But that allowed only one parent to be recognized legally; in the event of the illness, death, or separation of that parent, children could be removed from their families. Schools, hospitals, and other institutions could deny nonlegal parents the ability to make decisions about their children.

This shaky legal footing forced same-sex parents to seek various workarounds to protect their relationships with their children—drawing up paperwork like co-parenting or custody agreements. In 15 states and Washington, D.C., individuals can petition for “second-parent” adoption of children who were conceived through assisted reproduction or adopted. It can be costly and time-consuming—

frequently involving lawyers, criminal background checks, and a home study by a social worker—which can feel particularly invasive for new mothers and fathers who already consider themselves to be the parents of their children.

Even in states that recognized same-sex marriage, couples sought additional protection for when they traveled to areas of the country that didn't recognize their unions. When the Wesoleks went to South Carolina in May, they made sure to pack the paperwork confirming Danielle's parental status. "The thing that freaked me out was that this could be all down to one person—this could be down to one judge that said, 'You know what, I'm going to take a stand,'" said Amy Wesolek, Lena's birth mother, who conceived her through a sperm donor.

*Obergefell* has alleviated some of these anxieties and lowered the legal barriers to parenthood. Married gay couples are now allowed to adopt jointly in nearly every state, according to Emily Hecht-McGowan, director of public policy at Family Equality Council, an LGBT advocacy group. In June, a federal judge in Utah ordered that married lesbian couples who use sperm donors be recognized as legal mothers from birth, the same as with straight parents.

The decision hasn't cleared away all of the legal obstacles to same-sex parenthood, though. Michigan, Virginia, and North Dakota still allow child-welfare agencies to prohibit gay couples from adopting or fostering children for religious reasons. Mississippi prohibits same-sex couples from adopting altogether. And despite the ruling in Utah, there's still no guarantee in other states that couples using sperm donors will be automatically recognized as parents. States that allow surrogacy often lack clear laws delineating parental rights, and courts have repeatedly granted them to surrogate mothers over same-sex parents.

But there will be growing pressure to dismantle such barriers as same-sex marriage and parenthood become mainstream. "One of the reasons [same-sex] couples haven't been adopting is because they didn't have confidence in the system and the legality of it," said April Dinwoodie of the Donaldson Adoption Institute, a research and policy group. The Supreme Court's decision has proven to be reassuring: Post-*Obergefell*, one of the country's biggest surrogacy agencies is reporting a spike in interest from newly engaged and married LGBT couples.

**SO WILL SAME-SEX** parents simply become the new beacons of old family values? In his *Obergefell* decision, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy proclaimed that marriage is essential to parenthood and child-rearing. "Without the recognition, stability,

and predictability marriage offers, children suffer the stigma of knowing their families are somehow lesser," his decision reads.

Danielle Wesolek jokes that she feels like an "old man Republican" when she talks to her younger brother, who's straight and had his first child around the same time as she did. "Don't you think you ought to be married?" she tells him. And that's what gay conservatives had hoped for in their push for gay marriage. "The intent of same-sex marriage is not to establish new family structures but to reaffirm the old one," writer Jonathan Rauch said in a 2004 talk at the University of Michigan.

But the rise of LGBT families could also affirm a more expansive and progressive notion of what it means to be a parent. As gay men and women come out earlier in life, fewer will have children from previous heterosexual relationships. As a matter of necessity, most gay parents have to use outside help—a donor, a surrogate, or adoption agency—to bring children into their lives. That's affirmed a model of parenting built on relationships, support, and commitment rather than on biology or predetermined gender roles. "We will have no choice but to see the law eventually evolve with us, and we are going to see an increased, expanding definition of who makes a family and what families look like," Hecht-McGowan said.

Those differences should be recognized and respected—not overlooked. Writer Andrew Solomon, who has a young son, recounted in the *New Statesman* how he and his husband are still asked



"When it's two blokes with kids, you're not quite sure who's called what. So rather than Daddy One and Daddy Two like we're some sort of Dr. Seuss book, it seems better to have it be, he's Daddy and I'm Papa."  
—Neil Patrick Harris on *Conan* in 2012

"My children call me Maddy, which was the word that they came up with, combining *mommy* and *daddy*."  
—Jennifer Finney Boylan on being a transgender parent, 2005

**The traditional view of what constitutes a family is already a fiction. Only 46 percent of children now live with married heterosexual parents.**

"which of us is the mom," comparing his experience to a single mother being asked what it's like to be "both mom and dad."

"All men are created equal but not identical. New family structures are different from mainstream ones," he wrote. "We are not lesser, but we are not the same, and to deny the nuance of that asymmetry is to keep us almost as ensnared as we were when our marriages and families were impossible."

The nuclear family as ideal is itself a historical artifact that rose to greatest prominence in the



"My aunt and her Dutch partner are named Alice and Annaliese; to the three kids they're Mumma and Mummaleise. It's pretty cute."  
—From the Reddit thread, "Children of same-sex couples: what do you call your parents?"

1950s, when psychologists encouraged couples to abandon their friendships to focus on their families, explains marriage historian Stephanie Coontz, whose work Kennedy cited in his opinion. "In the long run, it harms your ability to call on a larger network of social support that you might need personally from the stresses of life and that your family needs," Coontz told me. "The problem with elevating [the nuclear family] as the source of all of your strength is that it almost by definition is too small to carry all of life's burdens."

Even as people like Justice Kennedy praise the virtues of marriage and a two-parent household, the old nuclear ideal is already a fiction. Only 46 percent of children now live with married heterosexual parents, and a "record share of Americans have never married," according to Pew Research. "Legalizing same-sex marriage continues a trend toward more complex family relationships," said sociologist Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University. "We're becoming related to more and more people to whom we owe less and less."

Gay parenting simply adds another layer of complexity to what's already a diverse picture. In his book *Modern Families*, sociologist Joshua Gamson explains the ways that assisted reproductive technology and adoption have challenged traditional notions of kinship: A lesbian couple

teamed up with a gay couple to adopt two children; a woman carried a child conceived from her partner's egg and a sperm donor. Gamson also tells his story. His first daughter was conceived through an egg donated by one friend and carried by another. His second daughter was born through a privately hired surrogate.

Our notions of what constitutes a family continue to expand and evolve: Already, open adoptions have become more popular for adoptive parents, gay and straight. When Levi's birth mother discovered she was having a boy, she personally called Davis and Sawyers to tell them. They save every text message and email they receive from her to pass on one day to their son. So far, his birth mother hasn't taken up their invitation to see him, but they told her she'd always be welcome. "It's important for him to know where he comes from, to know who his people are, to know what that foundation is," said Sawyers. "As a parent, I'm going to do everything I can to foster that relationship."

With gay marriage now legal across the country, such complexity will become increasingly mainstream, making it harder to settle on a simple definition of what makes a family. "The challenges to the more conventional notions of kinship are going to come up more and more," Gamson told me. "There's just going to be more of us." 🐼

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SPACE

## We Can Handle the Truth

Probing the perennial political fascination with extraterrestrial life.

BY REBECCA LEBER



29%

of registered voters believe aliens are real, according to a 2013 Public Policy Polling survey.

NASA'S NINE-YEAR-OLD *New Horizons* mission made history this summer by giving Earth its first close glimpse at the on-again, off-again ninth planet, Pluto. President Barack Obama was elated. "Pluto just had its first visitor! Thanks @NASA—it's a great day for discovery and American leadership," he tweeted.

But was *New Horizons* really Pluto's first visitor? John Podesta, who left his White House senior adviser position earlier this year to run Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, doesn't seem to think so. He questioned Obama's assumption: "How can you be sure this was Pluto's first visitor? #justasking," he tweeted in response.

Podesta is a well-documented science fiction enthusiast who regularly riffs on the *X-Files* tagline, "The truth is out there." In 2002, Podesta told reporters at the National Press Club that the U.S. government should approve the "declassification of records that are more than 25 years old." He was, of course, talking about UFOs. "It's time to find out what the truth really is that's out there," he said. "We ought to do it, really, because it's right. We ought to do it, quite frankly, because the American people can handle the truth. And we ought to do it because it's the law."

Podesta also wrote the foreword for Leslie Kean's 2010 book, *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government*

*Officials Go on the Record.* In it, Podesta made the same case for disclosure. “It’s time to find out what the truth really is that’s out there. The American people—and people around the world—want to know, and they can handle the truth.”

When he left his White House post in February, Podesta again fueled conspiracy theories by tweeting that his “biggest failure of 2014” was “not securing the #disclosure of the UFO files.”

Thanks to Podesta’s enthusiasm, Bill Clinton’s presidential library has been inundated with Freedom of Information Act requests regarding Podesta’s aliens. One request illustrates the general thrust of such inquiries: “2006-0492-F: All files on UFOs, Roswell, New Mexico, flying saucers, Area 51, or the TV show *X-Files* in the files of John Podesta.” It’s somewhat surprising that they didn’t seek to probe whether Podesta himself is an alien life form.

Even so, such requests aren’t completely in the tinfoil-hat realm of conspiracy nuts. As the Clinton White House’s chief of staff, Podesta would have had access to highly classified documents.

Space exploration has featured in presidential elections before. As *New York* magazine summarized earlier this year: In 2012, Newt Gingrich promised to build a base on a moon if elected; a few years before, in 2008, Democratic presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich dropped a bomb when he said he thought he saw a UFO once. In 1992, Ross Perot blamed alien life for political gridlock. “It’s not the Republicans’ fault, of course, and it’s not the Democrats’ fault,” he said during a debate. “Somewhere out there there’s an extraterrestrial that’s doing this to us, I guess.”

Bill Clinton, too, is open to the idea of extraterrestrial life. He appeared on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* in 2014 and suggested that he believes we may not be alone—though, unlike Podesta, he also assured us “there are no aliens” being kept from us. “We know now we live in an ever-expanding universe,” Clinton told Kimmel. “We know there are billions of stars and planets literally out there, and the universe is getting bigger. We know from our fancy telescopes that just in the last two years more than



**77%**

of Americans think there are signs aliens have visited Earth, even if they’re not sure aliens exist.

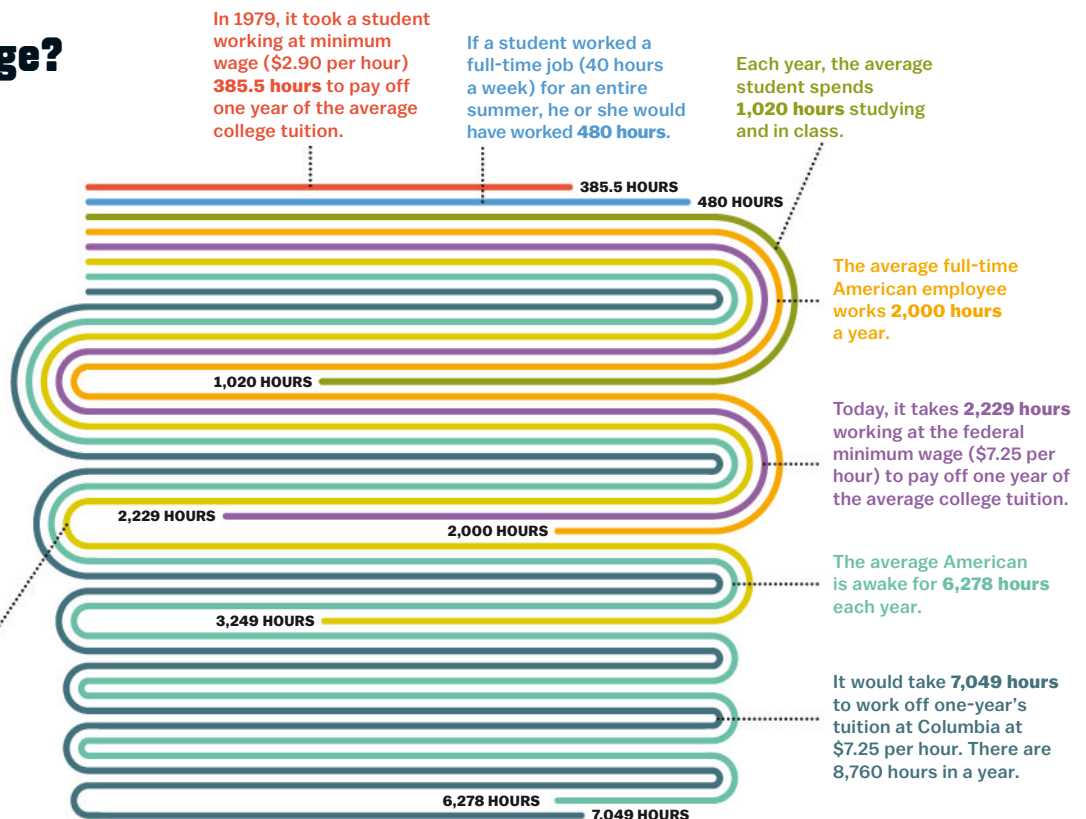
**21%**

of voters believe the government covered up a UFO crash at Roswell in 1947.

## Can You Work Through College?

Politicians like to say, “I worked my way through college” to prove their work ethic. But four decades ago, a year of tuition could be worked off in a summer. Compared with today’s kids, they had it easy.

To be both enrolled in school full-time and work enough at \$7.25 per hour to pay off one year of the average college tuition would take a student **3,249 hours**.



4%

of the public believe an alien lizard race controls society. So-called Reptilians disguise themselves as humans to obtain high-level government jobs. In 2011, Louis C.K. repeatedly asked Donald Rumsfeld, "Are you a lizard?" Rumsfeld dodged the question.

20 planets have been identified outside our solar system that seem to be far enough away from their suns—and dense enough—that they might be able to support some form of life."

So there's reason to think an extraterrestrial sighting might make a return to the campaign circuit. For instance: Ted Cruz, a 2016 Republican presidential candidate, is in charge of the Senate committee on NASA and has joked about aliens before. "I'll work with Martians. If—and the if is critical—they're willing to cut spending and reduce the debt."

Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential frontrunner, hasn't taken a position on the existence

of extraterrestrials, however. Her campaign declined to comment on the possibility of life in outer space. But UFO believers hope she may be open to the possibility of other intelligent life. Stephen Bassett, who heads the Extraterrestrial Phenomena Political Action Committee, told *Roll Call* magazine in February, "As far as I'm concerned ... Hillary Clinton is not going to become the president of the United States without going through the extraterrestrial issue."

As the *New Horizons* spacecraft flew by Pluto and beamed its first images back to Earth, Clinton joined in the celebrations. "Let's always keep exploring," she tweeted. 🌌

## MEDIA

# National Review's Bad Conscience

Why the magazine is quick to accuse liberals of fascism and Nazism.

BY JEET HEER



## NATIONAL REVIEW'S FASCIST FINGERPOINTING:

"Thus what we see is something new, liberal fascism. The ethos must be imposed by force because it is so unnatural."

—Jeffrey Hart, *National Review*, February 13, 1987

**NATIONAL REVIEW HAS** a fraught relationship with National Socialism. In recent years, the magazine has taken to likening liberals and socialists to fascists and Nazis. In a recent, much-derided article, correspondent Kevin Williamson claimed that Democratic presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders was leading "a national-socialist movement, which is a queasy and uncomfortable thing to write about a man who is the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland and whose family was largely wiped out in the Holocaust." Later in the article, Williamson added that Sanders is not a "national socialist in the mode of Alfred Rosenberg or Julius Streicher," but this proviso couldn't undo the implication that Sanders and his supporters are modern-day Hitlerites. Nor is Williamson alone: His *National Review* colleague Jonah Goldberg authored a lengthy tome in 2008, *Liberal Fascism*, making essentially the same argument about the supposed links between modern-day progressives and the early twentieth-century European far right.

While self-evidently absurd as a line of argument, the Williamson-Goldberg thesis is a fine example of projection, especially interesting because of their magazine's long history of both publishing pro-fascist arguments and also resenting any accusations of being pro-Nazi. As the documentary *Best*

*of Enemies* reminds us, the relationship between *National Review* and Nazism was once the stuff of national television drama, in a notorious debate between Gore Vidal and *National Review* founder William F. Buckley. In August 1968, during the Democratic Convention in Chicago, Buckley compared New Left youths carrying pro-Viet Cong flags to pro-Nazis. Vidal responded by saying, "As far as I'm concerned, the only sort of pro- or crypto-Nazi that I can think of is yourself." This set off Buckley, who went bug-eyed and threatened Vidal, saying, "Now listen, you queer, stop calling me a crypto-Nazi or I'll sock you in the goddamn face."

**AS JOHN JUDIS** documents in his 1988 biography of Buckley, the conservative pundit's father and namesake, William F. Buckley Sr., was an anti-Semite and fascist sympathizer who tried his best to pass along his ideas to his large brood. In 1937, four of the Buckley kids burned a cross outside a Jewish resort. The eleven-year-old William Buckley Jr. didn't participate in the cross-burning only because he was deemed too young to participate, and, by his own account, "wept tears of frustration" at being left out of the hate crime. At this point the young Buckley agreed with his father's worldview and would argue, in the words of a



William F. Buckley on Steve Allen's variety TV show in 1963.

childhood friend, that “Bolshevik Russia was an infinitely greater threat than Nazi Germany.” The Spanish fascist leader Francisco Franco was a hero in the Buckley household, celebrated as a bulwark against the red menace.

As he came into adulthood Buckley gradually outgrew the anti-Semitism of his father. While the young Buckley did intervene to break up the engagement between his Jewish friend Tom Guinzburg and his sister Jane, he also came to see political anti-Semitism as toxic. After forming *National Review* in 1955, Buckley's relationship to the European right was complicated: He continued to admire Franco as a hero but drew a distinction between fascism (permissible) and outright Nazism (beyond the pale). *National Review* worked hard to distance itself from openly anti-Semitic publications: In 1958 Buckley circulated a memo declaring that no one who served on the masthead of *The American Mercury* could also serve on the masthead of *National Review*.

In 1955, *National Review* employed a troubled young right-winger named George Lincoln Rockwell to sell subscriptions. When Rockwell emerged as the leader of the American Nazi movement, Buckley took a two-pronged approach, publicly rebuking him and privately working to find him psychological and religious counseling. But in a 1960 editorial, after Rockwell was met by counterprotesters during

a march in New York City, *National Review* criticized the “mob of Jews who hurled insults at him. Some lunged at him, and were kept from Rockwell's throat only by a cordon of policemen. Are we ‘against’ the Jews whose pressure kept Rockwell from exercising his constitutional right to speak, and who would, if given the chance, have beat him bloody? Of course.”

It would be a mistake to read this editorial as a defense of free-speech absolutism of the sort that led the ACLU to support the right of Nazis to march in Jewish neighborhoods. For one thing, in practice, *National Review* was adamantly opposed to free speech absolutism and often defended McCarthyism. Moreover, “mob of Jews” wasn't that editorial's only target: It lambasted the civil rights movement for its “theatrical” challenge to Jim Crow in the South, a response that was “met, inevitably, by a spastic response. By violence.” During this period, *National Review* strongly opposed the civil rights movement and its tactics of civil disobedience. In effect, the *Review*'s position was that American Nazis had a right to march in New York, but American blacks should refrain from exercising their First Amendment rights in the South.

There were limits to the anti-Nazism of Buckley and *National Review*, which became ever clearer when Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Nazis' final solution, was captured by the Israelis in

**The Spanish fascist leader Francisco Franco was a hero in the Buckley household, celebrated as a bulwark against the red menace.**

Argentina in 1961 and brought to trial in Israel. In 1961, *National Review* described the Eichmann trial as a “lurid extravaganza” which would produce such dire results as “bitterness, distrust, the refusal to forgive, the advancement of Communist aims, [and] the cultivation of pacifism.” (The idea that Jews in 1961 had an obligation to forgive Nazis is worth pondering).

*National Review*'s position was not so much pro-Nazi as it was anti-anti-Nazi (in parallel with the anti-anti-racism the magazine also adopted). The arguments the magazine made weren't that Nazism was good, but that a focus on anti-Nazism kept attention away from the real enemies: Socialists

“One way to view the ethnophobic, heterophobic, liberal-fascist ethos would be as pity run mad, destroying what is good in the name of putative victims. Or one could see it as the last, rotten, decadent phase of Christian charity.”

—Jeffrey Hart, *National Review*, February 13, 1987

“It is not a joyful thing to impugn an American hero and icon with the label fascist.”

—Jonah Goldberg on John F. Kennedy, *Liberal Fascism*, 2008

"Yes, Nazis squelched independent labor unions. Yes, yes, Nazis repressed Socialists and Communists. Fine, fine. You know who else treated independent labor unions roughly? You know who else repressed Socialists and Communists? The Soviet Union."

—Jonah Goldberg,  
*National Review*,  
May 5, 2015.

and Communists. This anti-anti-Nazism was combined with outright enthusiasm for fascism. In 1957, Buckley declared that "General Franco is an authentic national hero."

In his 1987 book *From This Moment On*, then-*National Review* editor Jeffrey Hart penned an effusive tribute to Benito Mussolini. "His 1922 blackshirt march on Rome brought to an end a period of political deadlock and leftist riot," Hart asserts. "His domestic achievements were substantial. ... There was repression, the administering of doses of castor oil, but no gulags and Belsen or Cambodian-style slaughter. ... Mussolini was probably better read than any other national leader of his time. ... Mussolini's leadership made even proletarians take some pride in being Italian, and his addresses, broadcast across the Atlantic, were listened to with respect in

American-Italian households. ... Mussolini stood five feet six inches and had a massive, handsome head. ... Mussolini liked to interrupt his working day several times with sexual intercourse, often standing up and in his uniform, a very rapid performance." According to Hart, Mussolini made only "a single error in judgment": allying with Hitler in 1940.

So why did William F. Buckley react so badly to Vidal's gibe about being a crypto-Nazi? Why are *National Review* writers like Kevin Williamson and Jonah Goldberg so eager to prove that liberals are the real fascists and Nazis? The most likely answer is that they have a bad conscience: They know that the history of their political movement has been compromised by pro-fascist and anti-anti-Nazi sentiment, and they want to deflect attention from that toxic legacy. 🐞

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TECH

## Eat, Pray, Post

How virality is Westernizing the entire world.

BY NAVNEET ALANG

The varieties of flavors of American snacks around the world show either a touching cultural mixing or strange corn-syrup colonialism. In 1994, Cheetos entered the Chinese market with two flavors made for Chinese tastes—Savory American Cream and Zesty Japanese Steak. *Pepsi* is the generic word for cola in India, where Coca-Cola was absent from 1977 to 1993 because of regulations.

"THIS IS THE cause for obesity in America!" exclaims an Indian subject after eating a Pop Tart in a charming bit of viral fluff called "Indians Taste Test American Sweets." It's one of an endless video series produced by BuzzFeed, in which people from one country are filmed tasting the foods from another. They're simple, relatable, occasionally controversial, and basically engineered to go viral. I say charming, however, because this clip in particular gives us a perspective we so rarely see: young, urban people from outside the West gently critiquing American excess. It feels, briefly, like a viral video done right—ephemeral and shareable, to be sure, but still refreshingly challenging.

Most viral stuff works this way. But while perusing BuzzFeed's various international sites, I noticed a discomfiting uniformity. The listicles and the slickly edited videos they feature center around the same ideas: relationship quirks, patriotic celebrations, food, or the usual highly-specific ephemera of "only people from this city will get this." An optimist might look at this sameness as revealing a fundamental humanity, that glibly utopian notion that, underneath it all, we are the same. But perhaps

viral culture is more sinister. Perhaps it isn't about universalism and it isn't just harmless fun; perhaps it is part and parcel of an inevitable Westernization.

THE VIDEO THAT criticizes America's oddness is, after all, a bit of an anomaly. Much of the Taste Test series is about Americans testing snacks from all over—India, Singapore, Indonesia, and so on—and expressing their bewilderment and disgust at what are, to billions around the world, ordinary things. It's often uncomfortable to watch, disturbingly mimicking the disregard for non-Western cultures that underpinned colonialism. Several clips include the word *bizarre* in the title. One is forced to ask: Bizarre to whom, exactly?

The tone and content of these videos are also remarkably Western. The language is that of Tumblr, Twitter, or even early Gawker: clipped, ironic, disaffected. Posts about Snapchats that only Indians will understand are peppered with American idioms—"this could be us but u playing," many mentions of "bae." GIFs of Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai are used just like GIFs of Rihanna, as aspirational symbols meant to reassure and entertain. In the

video in which those same young, hip Indians criticize American excess and Kellogg's Pop Tarts, they do so in American terms.

At the same time, though, the production of these potentially viral posts is intended to appeal to differing demographics. BuzzFeed India's posts have been most clearly appealing to—and targeted at—people of Indian descent, like myself, and the content pushed there is often distinctly Indian. From collections of photos that show how beautiful India is to a Tumblr that uses GIFs to describe life in Delhi, the posts are breezy, fun, and refreshingly relatable.

There's something deeply gratifying about seeing one's culture as of the moment. When so much of what is defined as contemporary explicitly caters to a Western audience, seeing something as specific and silly as "19 Indian foods that taste better when it's raining"—something that plays off the uniquely celebratory attitude toward rain in India—makes one feel vital, hip, and modern. To see yourself represented is to be more alive, more real.

What does it mean, however, that so much of this representation is not only so American in style, but also that the nature of online virality makes its dissemination so self-reinforcing? On one hand, there is undoubtedly a case to be made that this kind of viral grammar marks a particular style as a global contemporary, as opposed to a Western one. Our bloggy way of speaking is a kind of international connective tissue, making people in Jakarta and Paris and Mumbai part of an emerging, connected, privileged international demographic.

On the other hand, when that global culture flows in mostly one direction, we have a larger problem: Virality starts to look like soft cultural imperialism. It's an assertion of Western values, neatly packaged as "7 GIFs You Won't Believe." The content shifts depending on location—"23 Incomparable Joys of Growing Up in Chennai" and so forth—but the form remains the same. The ideology is carried along. A post about a Bollywood power couple giving us #relationshipgoals is fun, but it also implies a specific perspective.

What this means, of course, is that virality has a kind of circular function. On BuzzFeed India, posts about *Harry Potter* show up with considerable frequency—and last time I checked, the Sorcerer's Stone wasn't exactly part of the ancient Hindu texts, the Vedas. Virality predominantly functions by reproducing what is already popular, while only occasionally propelling something novel to global popularity. It's rarely inventive.

The fact that BuzzFeed India's style is indistinguishable from Brooklyn blog-speak is evidence of

the circular relation of capital and culture—it's not coincidental that centers of global finance also tend to be centers of global culture. The nature of BuzzFeed's global operations is to produce local content in its own image: replicating a business model around the world as it also replicates a cultural one.

There is some resistance, though, elements that refuse to translate. A post on BuzzFeed India of bilingual English-Hindi puns may be groan-worthy, but its very indecipherability to a Western audience is important: The cultural specificity of Northern India can't be neatly subsumed into a binary model of Eastern and Western.

All that said, it's hard not to wonder where power fits into the global nature of virality. As theorist Homi Bhabha argued in his book *Location of Culture*, the First World is always considered the present and future on a time line where the Third World is perpetually the past. And perhaps online virality—in the way that it tightens into ever smaller circles of self-referentiality—is a sign that Bhabha was correct: That someone 10,000 miles away is talking about American obesity at all is indicative of not only how things work, but a sign that perhaps it is already too late to stop the march into a Westernized, viral future. 🍌



In India, **Cheetos Masala Balls** are one of the many "exciting shapes and flavours in the extruded segment," the company says. Lay's potato chips come in "India's Magic Masala" and "India's Lime 'n' Masala Masti," as well as "American Style Cream & Onion Flavour."



In BuzzFeed's "Indians Taste Test American Sweets," two participants compare pop rocks to meth.



For decades, beauty companies suggested straight hair was the secret to romantic and professional success. This product claims to let a woman choose her hair: "Soft and swingy? You decide. Then watch heads turn!"

Below, a registered nurse says, "my training is greatly responsible for my cautious nature"—and she wears her hair safely straightened.



## RACE

## My Hair, My Politics

For black women, stereotypes associated with Afros can't be shed, but their appeal is a nod to history and tradition.

BY **STACIA L. BROWN**



**LAST SUMMER**, I sheared twelve inches of chemically straightened hair from the coarser curls closest to my scalp. Afterward I had only an inch left in its natural state, a small Afro; at the time, I felt free.

I was working from home for a nonprofit then, so I didn't think much about how my co-workers would react. A few months after the haircut, though, my contract ended and I was on the job market again, with a rapidly sprouting Afro. It was the first time in 15 years of professional life that I'd ever interviewed for office positions without straight hair.

I was wary enough to poll my social media feeds: Should I straighten my Afro? Should I get braided extensions that could be styled into a neat, efficient

updo? Or should I walk in unapologetically, my hair as free as it was on the day I'd cut it?

One friend admonished me to avoid braids, suggesting I'd only be replacing one stereotype (*militant*) with another (*ghetto*). Others told me I was right to rethink walking in with a "bush." A blowout was gingerly suggested. Eventually, I sauntered into those interviews with my TWA—my teeny-weeny Afro—in part because I resented that I'd had to deliberate at all. That none of my interviewers mentioned my hair directly afforded me some sighs of relief, but every time I apply for a new position, those same aesthetic anxieties come immediately to mind.

Natural hair discrimination in the workplace has been widely reported. *Ebony* covered it in a 2013 op-ed, titled “Natural Hair vs. Corporate America: Why Are We Still Fighting This Battle?” DiversityInc addressed it in an advice column: “Do Blacks Need to Relax Their Natural Hair to Get Promoted?” In a 1981 case widely cited by legal scholars, *Rogers v. American Airlines*, Renee Rogers, a black woman employed with the airline, was told that her cornrow hairstyle violated the company’s grooming policy. She filed an action against the airline on the grounds of racial discrimination, and not only was her complaint dismissed—a federal court judged claimed Rogers failed to prove racism was at play—but she was also accused of mimicking white actress Bo Derek’s hairstyle in the 1979 film *10*.

Just last year, the Congressional Black Caucus took the U.S. military to task for its grooming policies, which barred cornrows, twists, and dreadlocks. The Transportation Security Administration has also come under fire for disproportionately patting down black women’s hair—especially their Afros. It’s a practice TSA only agreed to stop a few months ago, when the agency reached an agreement with the ACLU of Northern California, which had filed a complaint in 2012.

**THE AFRO IN** particular has a long political history. For the women and men who popularized the Afro during and following the civil rights movement, the style was a collective expression of culture, history, and genetics. It was rarely divorced from the politics of black unity. As author Bebe Moore Campbell wrote in a 1982 issue of *Ebony*, “In the ’60s and ’70s, the Afro was more than hair; it was a symbol of black pride, a silent affirmation of African roots and the beauty of blackness.” To some, this is threatening. As a black woman choosing not to straighten my hair, I am at risk of being viewed as a professional liability, or of being forbidden a personal freedom granted everyone else. In August, *Allure* ran a breezy feature on Afros that entirely erased women of color, treating the look as a white woman’s entitlement. “An Afro is not an introvert’s hairstyle,” they write, apparently uninterested in the hairstyle’s political overtones. “This is confident hair.”

For black women and women whose hair is like mine—tightly coiled, not loosely curly—confidence isn’t an aesthetic option. It’s a necessity, as we navigate professional and public spaces where our natural hair won’t always be welcome. The decision to wear an Afro or any other unstraightened hairstyle is only as “ballsy” and “powerful”—*Allure*’s characterization—as our ability to obtain and maintain employment, navigate stereotypes and discrimination,

and deal with microaggressions like unwanted hair-touching. (That’s not even to mention that wearing an Afro means convincing ourselves that years of advertising positioning straight hair as necessary to either enhance our beauty or to boost our chances at professional advancement were wrong.)

It’s tempting to divorce aesthetic statements from their cumbersome histories, but natural hair is a signifier. A year of wearing my hair the way it grows from my scalp, without heat or chemical alteration, has taught me that the past is inescapable. On a black woman, an Afro invokes the Black Power movement, “black is beautiful” counterculture campaigns, and decades of discrimination. I feel that I am now a more authentic version of myself than I was when a foot of straightened hair hung limp in my face; the authenticity makes me feel more beautiful. Wearing an Afro has been like stepping out of camouflage into the open.

For me, it’s much easier to achieve this hairstyle than it is for a woman with straight hair, but it’s much easier for them to wear it without repercussion. For them, it’s aesthetic drag; for me, it’s become a kind of social combat. Every day, I go out into a world that resents my Afro. Every day that I choose not to straighten it, I win. 🏆



A 1969 issue of *Jet* featured a woman with an Afro on its cover, claiming the hairstyle was a point of black pride.



“Kama mama, kama binti is poetry in Swahili,” an Afro Sheen ad from the ’70s reads, reflecting the decade’s changing politics. “And your little girl’s natural is proud poetry in velvety rings and curls.”

One  
woman's  
order  
is another's  
adventure



# Lust for Learning

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**Is erotic longing between professors and students unavoidable?**

BY **LAURA MILLER**

**MY FRESHMAN AMERICAN** literature course presented me with many revelations, but one of the most indelible happened not inside the auditorium classroom where, twice a week, our professor stood onstage in front of more than a hundred 18-year-olds. Instead, it came as I stepped into the women's restroom afterward, just in time to overhear two of my fellow classmates rhapsodizing over how cute the professor was, with particular attention lavished on his long, slightly bowed, denim-clad legs. I was naïve enough to be a bit shocked that girls my age would talk that way about such an exalted figure. And I felt a little sheepish, too, since I'd secretly been thinking the same thing myself.

Students sometimes nurse crushes on their teachers, and teachers sometimes lust after their pupils; these are facts of

life so commonplace as to have become the ultimate cliché: a porn motif. Like many vaguely parental relationships, the pedagogic one can have a strong and unsettling erotic undertow. My fellow students and I probably wouldn't have looked twice at our prof if we'd met him at the bus stop or waiting in line at the campus café; he was at least 35—maybe even 40! Like many young women, however, we were far from immune to the mystique of a man who can command the admiring attention of a crowd, and if he was like most men, he was sensible to the flattery of all those rapt faces. Yet at the root of this queasy dynamic was genuine intellectual excitement. His class set off a series of firecrackers in my understanding of books, ideas whose impact I can still recollect vividly. Perhaps it's possible to separate the thrill of encountering a fascinating mind from the fizz of libido, but I can't imagine why anyone would want to. That species of desire makes ideas feel more vitally connected to our bodily

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY **STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON**  
STYLING BY **ANGHARAD BAILEY**

lives and tells us that passions can be spurred by qualities deeper than six-pack abs.

Whether students or their teachers should ever act on such desires, however, has never been an untroubled question. To do so raises the possibility of both favoritism and exploitation. If we think of the university as a purely professional realm, where services are exchanged for a fee among rational economic actors, then sexual relationships seem clearly out of bounds, as they are in most workplaces, especially between supervisors and subordinates. But if the academy is something more than that, if, as many of its members hope, it's a place where deep and lasting collegial bonds are formed, where mentors and protégés can become close friends and where young lives are transformed by a galvanic encounter with knowledge and their own latent capabilities, how can we possibly stamp out the potential for desire to arise? Perhaps what makes pedagogy so potent also makes it inherently erotic.

Lines in the debate have been drawn more clearly in recent years. In February, for example, Harvard announced that it was banning all consensual "romantic or sexual" relationships between faculty members and undergraduates, regardless of whether the student is enrolled in any of the professor's classes or is even in the same department (although faculty can still date graduate students if they don't supervise their work). These and other revisions of university codes followed the announcement last year that the Department of Education would be investigating 55 colleges and universities for "possible violations of federal law over the handling of sexual violence and harassment complaints" under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. (Harvard was found to have failed to comply with Title IX in responding to such accusations.)

Certainly not everyone agrees with the changes. Quarreling with them got Northwestern film professor Laura Kipnis into trouble earlier this year for an essay she published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. She feels that prohibitions on faculty-student dating are paternalistic and part of an increasing tendency to infantilize students as preposterously fragile "trauma cases waiting to happen," rather than as adults acquiring the experience that will enable them to navigate a rough-and-tumble world. "Bona fide harassers" ought to be punished, she insists, but in the current climate, "the ordinary interpersonal tangles and erotic confusions that pretty much everyone has to deal with at some point in life" are being treated the same way as quid-pro-quo demands for sexual favors in exchange for grades and letters of recommendation.

Kipnis's essay, titled "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe," drew ire by challenging our propensity for viewing professors in relationships with students as sexual predators, a view that Kipnis regards as hopelessly reductive. To illustrate her point, Kipnis offered the example of a Northwestern philosophy professor (whom she didn't know and didn't name) at the center of a "murky and contested" complaint lodged by an undergraduate. He was accused of getting her drunk at an art

exhibition and then groping her while they slept, fully clothed, in his bed. Kipnis made a passing reference to the same professor's involvement with a graduate student whom he claimed he had dated. Two students then made Title IX complaints against Kipnis, arguing that her essay (and a tweet) constituted "retaliation" against the students who filed the original charges. As a result, Kipnis herself became the subject of a disturbingly opaque investigation, although she was soon cleared. Then she wrote about *that* for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in an essay called "My Title IX Inquisition."

Exactly what happened between the philosophy professor and his two students is not all that material to Kipnis's argument: She is more concerned that the new university strictures permit only one view of student-faculty relationships, when in fact, like most human connections, they sprawl across a bewildering spectrum. The official model will of course apply in some cases, but it will also do an injustice in a great many others. In particular, this model invalidates the student's own desire and self-determination. Like a drunk person or a child, a student, by definition, cannot consent to a tryst with a faculty member. As Harvard's policy puts it, "Even when both parties have consented at the outset to the development of a romantic or sexual relationship between individuals of different University status, it is the person in the position of greater authority who, by virtue of his or her special responsibility and the core educational mission [of the faculty of Arts and Sciences], will be held accountable for unprofessional behavior." How did we get to the point of protecting young adults' feelings by denying that their feelings count?

**SURELY DESIRE AND** love have flared between teachers and their adult students since pedagogy began, but most of it has been invisible. Until recently, Western education at almost every level was a same-sex activity, open mostly to men of the upper classes, so it stands to reason, that most student-teacher affairs have been between men, even if they've left few historical records. Except, that is, at the very beginning, in ancient Greece, where, according to Daniel Mendelsohn, who often writes on classical antiquity, there was a "literary rhetoric," much like the medieval ideal of courtly love, surrounding the relationship between a boy and an older man. "It has to do with an archaic custom for the military training of the aristocracy where you send a young recruit with an older guy out into the hills," he told me. The smitten man, called the erastes, plies the passive boy student, the eromenos, with gifts and love poetry, until the boy reluctantly surrenders, although he is not expected to find pleasure in the act. Their coupling is a fair trade, and at least partly an initiation into manhood, one that can be continued without shame until the boy begins to grow a beard, at which point he may become an erastes himself. Such affairs weren't an expected or obligatory part of Greek education, but when they occurred, they were viewed not as furtive transgressions, but as a refined custom that enhanced the relationship between generations.

This is the tradition that the beautiful, highborn Athenian youth Alcibiades ironically invokes near the end of Plato's *Symposium*. Alcibiades, bright but wild and notorious for his amorous carryings-on with both genders, is a student and would-be lover of Socrates who arrives boisterously drunk at a gathering of Socrates and his other pupils. Alcibiades professes to be smitten, "astounded and entranced" by Socrates's words, but he also warns the other students that Socrates himself only pretends to feel desire in return. "All the beauty a man may have is nothing to him; he despises it," the young man warns. Alcibiades's concerted attempts to seduce the philosopher have come to naught. All Socrates cares to do is talk, and he chides Alcibiades for thinking his own beauty is a coin with which to buy the older man's wisdom: "You are trying to get genuine in return for reputed beauties." Their banter is worldly and mocking, leaving no one seriously hurt. The exchange is meant to demonstrate Socrates's imperviousness to the weaknesses that afflict lesser men, but it also reveals that pedagogical lust did not always come from the erastes; the eromenos, too, could initiate an affair, and attraction could be fueled by brilliance as well as beauty.

Socrates, according to Alcibiades, had Athens at his feet due to the sheer power of his eloquence, but until the emergence of European universities in the Middle Ages, it would have been absurd to speak of a perilous "power differential" between students and professors. Most teachers were a form of glorified servant, hired to tutor the children of the wealthy. Still, when the pupil was female and the instructor male, danger lurked. What between a man and an almost-man might be viewed as a worldly exchange of knowledge for beauty between equals could only result in rapine and ruination once a woman was involved.

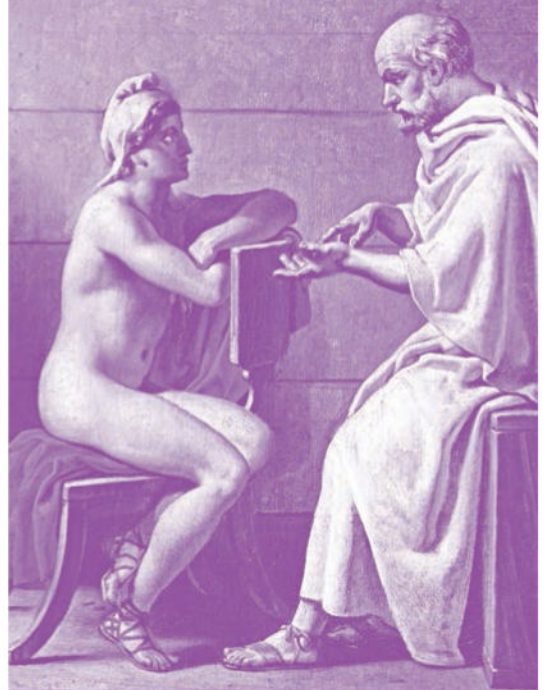
Peter Abelard, a twelfth-century French scholar, fell in love with Héloïse d'Argenteuil, the niece and ward of a Parisian canon, in part because of her reputation for "wit" (intelligence), as well as for her celebrated beauty. He finagled his way into her uncle's house by agreeing to instruct Héloïse in exchange for lodging. Their love led to her pregnancy and a secret marriage, but Héloïse's uncle remained angry at Abelard's betrayal (and perhaps believed he was about to discard her, thereby disgracing their family), so he had a group of thugs break into Abelard's room and castrate him. Abelard became a monk and urged Héloïse to become a nun. Eventually, each rose to a position of authority in their religious orders, whereupon they commenced their famous correspondence, seven letters in total that are part passionate love missive, part religious instruction, the two threads intimately intertwined.

It is Héloïse's side of this exchange that makes it immortal: Few medieval documents speak so directly or with such a restless, unbridled spirit. Her letters are also—in the literary tradition, at least—a rare case in which the junior, female partner in such a relationship expresses her passion for her mentor. Héloïse's uncle, she tells Abelard, believed that he could extinguish her love for her teacher by removing his

genitals: "He measured my virtue by the frailty of my sex, and thought it was the man and not the person I loved. But he has been guilty to no purpose. ... If, formerly, my affection for you was not so pure, if in those days both mind and body loved you, I often told you even then that I was more pleased with possessing your heart than with any other happiness, and the man was the thing I least valued in you."

As women gradually laid claim to higher education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the specter of more Abelards and Héloïses loomed. Women's colleges with female faculty seemed safe; the possibility of lesbian liaisons there either never occurred to parents and other authority figures or simply wasn't taken seriously. When a few exceptional women gained admission to male bastions, the occasional extraordinary partnership was formed. Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt met and began an affair in 1924 at the University of Marburg, when she was 18. Married and nearly twice her age, Heidegger had no intention of leaving his wife, which caused Arendt some pain. In their relationship, as in much of his professional life—including his membership in and collaboration with the Nazi Party—Heidegger exhibited an ignominious deference to respectability and a willingness to do whatever it took to advance his own prominence. Furthermore, Richard Wolin's *Heidegger's Children* suggests the philosopher had many other relationships with his students, including the woman

## Alcibiades professes to be "astounded and entranced" by Socrates's words.



who was his wife when he met Arendt. Was Heidegger's relationship with her an exercise in exploitation?

Arendt did not appear to think so. She remained devoted to him for much of her life, even after the extent of his involvement with the Nazis became known. Her own thought had been transfigured during her university years by Heidegger's genius. She wrote in *The New York Review of Books* of his rejection of "the old opposition of reason versus passion, spirit versus life" and his championing of "the idea of a passionate thinking, in which thinking and aliveness become one." Arendt was no pushover, and she had ample justification for publicly repudiating her former lover. Yet instead she defended him from the consequences of his own actions during the war. Whether it was the remnants of love or the lingering intoxication of his genius that kept her sweet is a question that biographers and historians continue to debate.

**THE MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY** flood of women into universities of all kinds coincided with a relaxation of sexual mores to create the ideal environment for unscrupulous male professors to exploit. Andrea Dworkin, who attended Bennington in the 1960s, when it was still a women's college, saw it as "the archetypical brothel": a place where male faculty members could be spotted sneaking into students' bedrooms and famous visiting artists and writers were, as a matter of course, "provided with one or more Bennington girls" from which to choose. Dworkin was prone to overstatement, but the college's reputation was well known. Kathleen Norris, a poet and essayist of around the same age, recalls being introduced at a New York City party as a Bennington undergrad and getting the response, "Oh. The little red whorehouse on the hill." Norris herself later plunged into an affair with a married professor, finding that it "buoyed me, stimulating me not only sexually but intellectually as well. I was discovering a whole new self." The man turned out to be a "habitual philanderer" who dumped her as soon as he sighted a fresh target. She was crushed but also relieved, and in a way that is difficult to describe, she felt liberated. Another, more vulnerable young woman might have decided that her whole new self had been built on a lie and fallen into despair.

This view of professor-student affairs—lecherous male professors who survey the latest crop of dewy and compliant coeds like shoppers hovering over a flat of peaches—has been the prevailing one for decades, and not without cause. A cautionary book on the phenomenon called just that, *The Lecherous Professor*, by Billie Wright Dziech and Linda Weiner, was published in 1984 and promised its readers a taxonomy of the species in all its variations and favorite tactics. The product of much pent-up indignation and disgust, it was packed with the testimonials of women who'd been leered at, propositioned, groped, baldly offered better grades in exchange for sex, and raped by boorish men ranging from lowly industrial-design instructors to Nobel laureates. It helped make the sexual harassment of women on campuses an issue for national talk shows and magazine articles.

The lecherous professor also has his literary counterpart in novels by Philip Roth (his David Kepesh books), Bernard Malamud (*A New Life*), and Malcolm Bradbury (*The History Man*, in which husband and wife academics both avail themselves of student lovers) and fictional apotheosis in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, in which a teacher's opportunistic affair with a student both precipitates his downfall and serves as the emblem of Western civilization's exploitative attitude toward the rest of the world. Sometimes these books excused, validated, and even glorified the professor's ardor while admitting the inequalities in their relationships with students. Roth, in particular, has portrayed this sort of man with notable frankness: "They come to my first class, and I know almost immediately which is the girl for me," Kepesh says. "There is

## **Surely desire and love have flared between teachers and their adult students since pedagogy began, but most of it has been invisible.**

a Mark Twain story in which he runs from a bull, and the bull looks up to him when he's hiding in a tree, and the bull thinks, 'You are my meat, sir.' Well, that 'sir' is transformed into 'young lady' when I see them in class." The perspective of the young lady herself is typically absent from this canon.

There have, however, been dissenters to this view of student-professor affairs, academics who agree that sexual harassment is a problem but believe that attempts to control it have gone too far. Kipnis has a predecessor in Jane Gallop, an academic at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who nearly 20 years ago wrote *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*, a book recounting her own hellish season at the center of a similar controversy. While Kipnis argues that student-faculty relationships are not necessarily harmful and can even serve as an emotional education, Gallop went further. She contended that sexual attraction was integral to intellectual development and incorporated that belief in her teaching style.

In 1992, two female graduate students claimed that a few years earlier Gallop had made sexual advances to them and then penalized them academically when they refused her. She was eventually cleared of the charges of harassment (that is, of discriminating against them for sexual reasons) but was reprimanded for engaging in a "consensual amorous relation" with one of the students. It was a sort of hypercharged flirtation. Physically, the two never went further than a highly theatrical kiss that took place at a crowded lesbian bar during a conference. But even by Gallop's admission, her relationship

with the student was complex, stormy, and rife with innuendo and much-discussed sexual tension.

**GALLOP WENT ON** to defend the erotic dimension of her interactions with this student and others. “I do not respect the line between the intellectual and the sexual,” she writes in *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*. Galvanized by the on-campus women’s movement of the early ’70s, when she was an undergraduate, she wanted her students to experience the same ecstasies that turned her from a passive girl into an “engaged, productive student and a sexually energized, sexually confident woman.” A self-described Freudian at heart, Gallop viewed her method as a form of transference, in which people form emotional, frequently eroticized attachments to authority figures in adulthood that resemble the dynamic they had with important people from their childhood, typically their parents. A skillful psychotherapist can use transference to help a patient cope with her past and forge a better future (and may also need to fend off the patient’s attendant crush). Gallop, who felt empowered as a student after seducing a few of her own professors and members of the committee overseeing her dissertation, believed that her teaching style simultaneously mobilized desire to fuel academic work and trained an insightful theoretical eye on desire itself.

It helps in understanding the hubris of this to know that Gallop also belonged to a generation of post-structuralist theorists in the humanities who had become celebrities in the academic world. Instead of laboring reverently over the work of long-dead geniuses, theorists turned the tables by crafting impenetrably mandarin writings that revealed the works of past greats to be rife with unexamined, noxious ideologies or simply irrelevant to the world outside the text. Rejecting the role of high priest, theorists were usurpers who aspired to the status of deities. After the decidedly undonnish model of the French philosopher Michel Foucault—who, with his shaved head and fondness for leather bars, was a veritable prototype for the breed—they cultivated dashing, renegade personas and relished talking about anal sex and other risqué subjects when discussing, say, sixteenth-century English poetry. Those who excelled at this showy scholarship became stars and could command plum jobs and phalanxes of acolytes, veritable cults of personality. It was a sweet gig if you could get it, and Gallop got it. She wore outrageous outfits and commanded a devout following. Hiring her was a coup for UWM, where the search for a senior feminist theorist had been protracted. Many UWM students were thrilled to work with her. “It was the most intense pedagogic experience I’ve ever had,” one of Gallop’s doctoral candidates rhapsodized to *Lingua Franca*, a magazine about academic culture.


Gallop didn’t actually sleep with any of her UWM students, however. In fact, much of the flirtation between the professor and her graduate student seems to have consisted of long discussions of whether Gallop, who lived with her male partner and their son, was really sexually attracted to other women or was just pretending to be in order to burnish her bad-girl

persona. At times, reading the various accounts of the case, it’s not clear whether the complainant was angry because Gallop wanted to have sex with her or because Gallop didn’t. There is more than one way, after all, for a professor to use her students.

**HISTORY TELLS US** that imposing a moratorium on erotic longing between professors and their students would be as quixotic as trying to forbid campus gossip, but to condone acting on such desires is another matter. At the very least, a liaison between an instructor and one of the students in his or her class constitutes an unfairness—not least to the other students, who can’t hope to receive due attention when competing with a paramour. Plus these things, when they go bad, can lead to an unholy mess.

Bans on faculty-student relationships amount to an institutional throwing up of the hands when it comes to parsing the difference between an intense pedagogic experience and a manipulative seduction. Better to define any sexual contact at all as categorically predatory than to get tangled up in the mysteries of any individual couple’s story. That doesn’t necessarily mean that university administrators actually believe that students are inevitably the victims of their professors when such affairs happen. Chances are they’re just trying to save their institutions trouble in the form of protests, angry parents, and lawsuits.

With the new conduct codes in place, if something goes wrong, if the idea of passionate thinking segues, as it so often does, into less cerebral passions that later sour, the administration will not be called upon to determine just how wolfishly one-sided those desires were. The faculty member will be, a priori, in the wrong: done and dusted. On paper, such policies define students as people incapable of freely deciding to sleep with their professors, or, as Kipnis puts it as “helpless damsels tied to railroad tracks.” But in practice they place the ability to define an encounter or relationship as either consensual or coerced in the student’s hands. Some will choose not to complain about the most flagrant violations of sexual harassment codes. Others will be empowered to demand harsh penalties for wrongs that would strike many of us as misdemeanors.

It is an excess of caution that makes the vulnerabilities of a community’s most fragile members the benchmark for everyone else’s sexual choices, but university administrators are probably not losing any sleep over the chilling effect the new conduct codes will have on their faculties’ love lives. No wonder the professorial classes are up in arms, and not just the sleazy old goats who try to parlay grades into favors. The aphrodisiac qualities of intellectual excitement can’t be regulated away, and the comelier academics I know always seem to be besieged by student suitors, some of whom have great difficulty taking no for an answer. One woman’s ordeal is another’s adventure, a chance to flaunt her ability to beguile the teacher whose lectures leave her spellbound. It’s up to the faculty to see if they can determine which is which. They’re supposed to be the grown-ups, after all. 

# Professor Bellow

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The influence of the academy made Saul Bellow's fiction insufferable.

BY JEET HEER

**SAUL BELLOW WAS** of two minds about the academy. In a 1957 article for *The Nation*, entitled “The University as Villain,” he described English departments as being filled with “discouraged people who stand dully upon a brilliant plane, in charge of masterpieces but not themselves inspired.” He had by then spent two decades working as an itinerant English professor—at Bard, Pestalozzi-Froebel Teachers College, and the University of Minnesota, among others—in order to supplement his meager writing income. This was not an unusual career in a period when the business of writing fiction became increasingly intertwined with academia. Not only did MFA programs begin to turn novel-writing into something like a guild profession, but many writers—from Bernard Malamud at Oregon State University to Vladimir Nabokov at Cornell—relied on an academic paycheck to fund their works in progress. Though teaching obligations can be burdensome, for Bellow the university was more than a source of income; it allowed him to glimpse a fuller intellectual life.

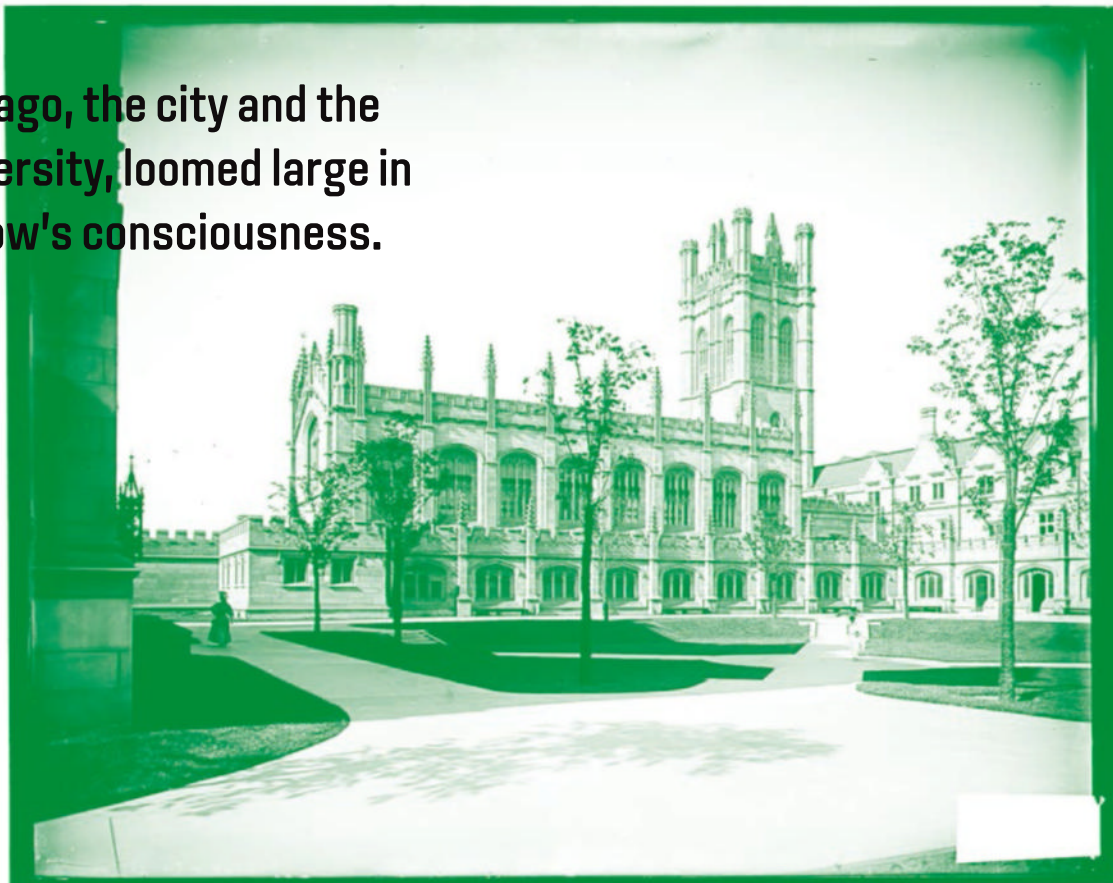
Hidden behind his complaint in *The Nation* was the lament of a disappointed lover, for whom living among inspiring masterpieces was the summit of human achievement. If most ordinary professors couldn’t live up to his ideal, Bellow was still drawn to the minority for whom ideas were a matter of life and death. His best book was *Herzog*, his 1964 novel about the renegade professor Moses Herzog, who pens desperate letters to world dignitaries, all the time festering from the wound of his best friend running off with his wife. But *Herzog* contained, too, the seeds of Bellow’s future failures. It was the first of his professorial novels, which would portray intellectuals like Artur Sammler and Abe Ravelstein as exemplars of wisdom and insight. All but one (*Humboldt’s Gift* in 1975) of his subsequent novels would feature an academic hero.

By 1981, Bellow had abandoned his earlier ambivalence and swung around to the conclusion that, as he told *The New York Times*’ Michiko Kakutani, “It’s in the university and only in the university that Americans can have a higher life.” And in real

INTELLECTUAL MAN HAD  
BECOME AN EXPLAINING  
CREATURE.



Chicago, the city and the university, loomed large in Bellow's consciousness.



life, Bellow had become a fixture of various academic haunts, most durably as a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, from 1962 to late 1993. But the novels Bellow wrote under the influence of the academy are some of his worst. It does little service to Bellow's reputation to pretend that everything he wrote deserves preservation and revisiting. So arid are *The Dean's December* (1982) and *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987) that inescapable questions emerge: Where did he go wrong? How did so gifted a writer lay waste to his talents?

Bellow was an early test case for novelists trying to get by in the academy, and a particularly telling case, since he was a more enthusiastic recruit than most. As last year's *n+1* anthology "MFA vs. NYC" demonstrated, the tension between academia and real life has only deepened and still defines the contours of literary life. Cagey and brainy, Bellow wanted to be the novelist of both the streets and the faculty lounge. Alas, in too much of his work, he serves as a cautionary tale of how schools can open minds but can also sometimes trap the soul.

**Bellow had always** been attracted to intellectual life and initially looked for it beyond the academy: Starting off as a writer in the late '30s, he gravitated toward the most

highbrow of the literary quarterlies, *Partisan Review*, with its dual and contrary loyalty to high modernism and political revolution. And like the New York intellectuals, Bellow aspired to be a master of all thought, not bounded by disciplines but happily jumping from literature to politics to sociology to philosophy. Yet it was Chicago's Committee on Social Thought that provided the perfect niche for a wide-ranging polymath like Bellow.

Created in 1941 by the historian John Nef, anthropologist Robert Redfield, economist Frank Knight, and university president Robert M. Hutchins, the committee was designed as a meeting ground for specialists in all areas of the humanities and social sciences to exchange ideas across disciplinary boundaries. In Nef's grand words, the committee aimed to forge "the unification of all recent discoveries in the arts and sciences." Bellow thrived on the committee, which gave him both a steady income and, just as importantly, the chance to teach graduate seminars and engage in endless bull sessions with the sociologist Edward Shils, political theorist Allan Bloom, the art historian and critic Harold Rosenberg, and religious historian Mircea Eliade. Bellow enthused over the Committee on Social Thought as "the most beautiful of all my employers" and "a marvelous racket." Bellow could

teach courses on the writers he loved—Proust, Dickens, Dostoyevsky—and drink in the elixir of exalted ideas.

While he idealized the life of the mind, the actual ideas he gravitated towards were often foolish, if not absurd. As a member of the committee, his lifelong proclivity for attaching himself to dubious gurus with messages of esoteric redemption tinged, at times, with apocalyptic despair, only worsened. In the early '50s Bellow had become a follower of Wilhelm Reich's dingbat psychological theories, even spending time sitting in an Orgone Accumulator, a wooden box that supposedly harnessed the power of orgasms. In the 1960s, Bellow went on to find solace in Shils's snooty Weberian despair, in the 1970s in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy ("a path of knowledge aiming to guide the spiritual element in the human being to the spiritual in the universe"), and eventually, in the late '70s and '80s, in Bloom's self-congratulatory popularization of Leo Strauss's political philosophy. In justifying his interest in Steiner's shifty mysticism, Bellow told an interviewer in 1975, "It puts back into life a kind of magic we've been persuaded to drop."

These supposed sages provided the intellectual undergirding of Bellow's novels. His trust in them tended toward the credulous. Shils, whose resistance to social change Bellow was all too quick to adopt, not only served as a model for the hero of 1970's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* but he also played a substantial role in editing the work. According to James Atlas's *Bellow: A Biography*, "Bellow gave [Shils] a copy of the typescript, and Shils annotated it so extensively that the novel became—according to Daniel Fuchs—'something of a collaborative effort.'" The best that can be said about these intellectual mentors is that they demonstrate Bellow's admirable and persistent attempt to make sense of the world. Unfortunately, they also contributed to Bellow's tendency, often out of control in the post-*Herzog* books, to pontificate in the place of narrative and to browbeat the reader with heady erudition that masks a solipsistic worldview.

The best example of how academia ruined Bellow can be seen in *The Dean's December*, his novel about the dean of a Chicago college who broods over his many battles both inside and outside the academy. The hero is Albert Corde, who bores readers and those around him with his thoughts on everything from Eastern European politics to race relations in Chicago to lead pollution's role in causing crime. In the second chapter, the dean lectures his wife, who happens to have been born in Romania, about the politics of her native land. "Minna let him go on, and he stopped himself. It wasn't the time to develop such views. Evil visions. The moronic inferno. He read too many articles and books."

This moment of respite is a brief one, and the dean soon resumes lecturing to one and all. As the novel makes clear, the fact that Minna tunes out her husband is her fault and not that of the dean's verbal diarrhea. "The Dean had a language problem" since English was not Minna's native tongue. "When he let himself go she didn't understand what he was saying." Elsewhere Minna is shown to admire her mate's quickness of mind, a trait Bellow seems to want us to be in awe of.

It's not only poor Minna who has to listen to her husband's ramblings. While the two are in Bucharest, the dean meets the American ambassador, whom he needs to consult about an urgent personal matter, but not before getting some punditry off his chest: "Together with this he wanted to try out on the Ambassador some of his notions about the mood of the West. Oh, he had a lots of topics: the crazy state of the U.S., the outlook and psychology of officialdom in the Communist

Bellow was an early test case for novelists trying to get by in the academy.

world, the peculiar psychoses of penitentiary societies like this one." As fictional characters who share a universe with the dean, Minna and the ambassador at least have the option to politely smile but not listen to him. Readers of the novel are not so lucky, and we get to plow through the dean's ruminations on these and many other topics through the course of a novel as bleak as a Chicago winter.

**There's no denying** that the dean, like Herzog and almost all the other post-Herzogian professors, is a know-it-all. To be fair, this claim of expert knowledge in all endeavors has a long lineage in fiction. As the literary critic Fredric Jameson noted in his 2013 book *The Antinomies of Realism*: "Balzac was supremely what the Germans call a 'Besserwisser,' a know-it-all at every moment anxious to show off his inside expertise. ... But surely Dickens had the virus as well, who was so proud of knowing all the streets in London; and we may safely attribute an analogous concupiscence of knowledge to all the other great encyclopedic fabulators, from Trollope to Joyce."

Yet there's a difference between the tradition of the encyclopedic besserwisser and Bellow. In trying to distill Paris or Dublin into their books, Balzac and Joyce wrote fictions that surveyed many characters radically different than themselves. Bellow's Chicago is seen through the prism of a fairly narrow perspective, that of a Hyde Park intellectual affiliated with the University of Chicago. Beyond their sweep and scope, Balzac and Joyce deal with the grit of experience, the durable and tangible encounter with the material world found in Bellow's early fiction that increasingly gave way to pure hot-air opinionating. A besserwisser can be tolerable if he or she is at least bringing news about the world. The scope of Dickens,

Joyce, Balzac's novels revealed something about the texture of human life, whether it was broad comedy that exalted urban life or showed the complexities of interiority. Bellow's ambitious attempt to encompass vast systems of knowledge offered far less news about unexplored areas of human life, save in peak works like *Seize the Day* and *Herzog*. Bellow in his worst fiction brought not news, but airy and often malicious theories about what was wrong with other people.

Late-period Bellow liked to sound off about the sorry state of the world. Wisdom literature, as the durable popularity of the Book of Ecclesiastes proves, can be valuable. But the quality of Bellow's wisdom was less solid than he assumed. Take gender for example. In his notebook *Herzog* wrote, "Will never understand what women want. What do they want? They eat green salad and drink human blood." In the context of the novel, with *Herzog* in emotional traction after his wife's rejection, this makes perfect sense. Novelistically, it's much more acceptable than *The Dean's December*, in which the hero's snobby misogyny toward his sister Elfrida is hard to swallow.

The dean's sibling, we're told, wrote a letter "with a sort of looping, rambling naïve charm, not strictly literate, with feminine flourishes" and "filled with lady phrases." Because of her generally middlebrow nature, the dean had "stopped 30 years ago trying to discuss theories with Elfrida." Elfrida's "breath was acrid with tobacco, perfumed with lipstick; her teeth were irregular and spotty. Her air was that of a woman who had given in to disappointment and ruin. 'Oh, to hell

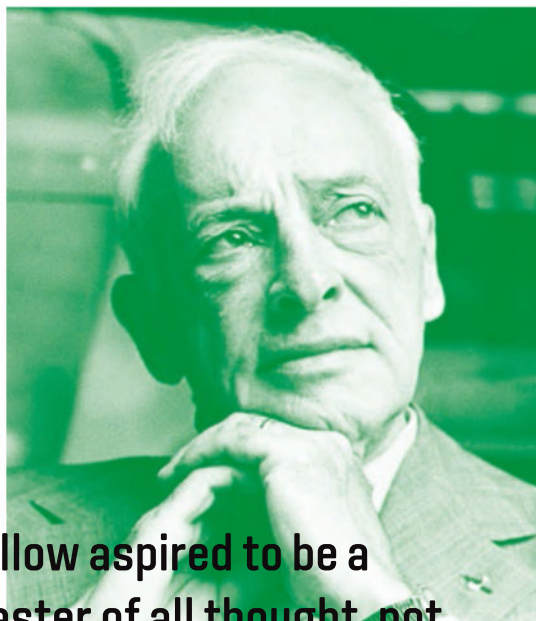
with it all!' This was conveyed, however, with a certain cleverness, ruefully amiable and warm. For of course she hadn't withdrawn the feminine claims of a younger woman. 'American gals' seldom did. In their fifties they were still 'dating.'" (For the record, in real life Bellow was not himself opposed to continuing courtship late into life: He married his fifth and final wife when he was 74 years old, and his youngest child, a daughter, was born when he was 84.)

This sort of free-floating attitudinizing isn't a flaw in the novel, it is the novel. Theorizing in late period Bellow is inextricable from narrative: the ideas the characters construct to understand reality makes up the very texture of the books. Much of the action of *The Dean's December* involves the dean trying to make sense of urban decay and African American life, writing a series of articles about the subject for *Harper's*, and then dealing with the attacks from critics of it. (The novel had its origins in a nonfiction book Bellow wanted to write about Chicago).

Novels of ideas have their value, but unfortunately the dean's ideas (which Bellow makes no effort to separate himself from) are shoddy. The crustiness and fustiness of the dean's disdainful reaction to urban life owes much to Shils's pompous sensibility, while the flights into transcendental reverie are infused with Steiner's thoughts. Despite his pronouncements in *Harper's*, the dean has little of interest to say when he actually encounters urban decay. Detecting the smell of excrement during a cab ride, he quips, "People have even stopped wiping themselves." Asked what he thinks about a paper arguing that lead poisoning contributes to crime, the dean responds with banalities: "Naturally, I'm a good concerned American. I want bad things to stop, good things to go forward."

The distastefulness of these ideas is coupled with a loss of linguistic control evident in the late-period novels. As Bellow wallowed in abstractions in his mind, he lost touch with living vernacular speech, which he so masterfully deployed in early novels like *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Herzog*. In *The Dean's December*, the dean has an unpleasant argument with his nephew, described in these terms: "But the real trouble, as he recognized, was that he was in a wrong relation to the sum of things—he himself. A sign of this was that he was in a useless debate—hopeless! All the premises were wrong—with this adolescent whose head was so remote." The sheer awkwardness of "whose head was so remote" is symptomatic of Bellow's own humongous head, no longer capable of hearing and observing but fly-trapped by its own internal arguments.

To read a book like *The Dean's December* is overhearing Saul Bellow muttering, not always coherently or cogently, to himself. Whole passages read like a professor preparing a lecture, trying out pedagogical gambits and provocative quips while also anticipating objections. As John Updike noted in a review in *The New Yorker*, Bellow's indistinguishability from his protagonist was a fatal flaw, preventing the novel from achieving the free flight of fiction. "Corde is too closely tied to his creator to be free, to fall, to be judged in the round, to have anything much happen to him."



**Bellow aspired to be a master of all thought, not bounded by disciplines.**

Bellow didn't write academic satire in the tradition of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* or Randall Jarrell's *Pictures From an Institution*, novels that tackled the external pretenses of academic life but with less acknowledgment of why someone might want to devote their lives to reading and thinking. In *Lucky Jim*, Jim Dixon doesn't give a farthing about the medieval history he devotes his time to studying, it's just an exercise he has to get through for his job. Herzog is also a historian, but his study of romanticism and Christianity touches on matters closest to his heart: His estranged wife was an erstwhile convert to Christianity and what moments of tranquility Herzog achieves during his prolonged breakdown come from a Wordsworthian contemplation of nature. Ideas mattered for Bellow, and he strove to write novels in which the drama of personal conflict was intimately intertwined with thinking about the world.

Eschewing the cheap jokiness of Amis's style, Bellow found a deep vein of comedy by linking emotional fragility with the search for meaning in the realm of thought. In one of his finest crackpot moments, Herzog pens a little missive to a supreme philosopher of the twentieth century: "Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression 'the fall into the quotidian.' When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?" Out of context, this might almost seem like a line that anticipates Woody Allen's humor in the feuilletons collected in *Without Feathers* (1975). In the pages of the novel, it has an added layer of poignancy because however misdirected they are, Herzog's questions are real ones. His life has fallen apart and he wants to know how it happened.

But there's a fine line between taking ideas seriously and falling prey to intellectual self-seriousness. All too often, Bellow's protagonists were not just men of ideas but pompous bores. At the beginning of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* there's a lament against explanation: "Intellectual man had become an explaining creature," the narrator tells us. "The roots of this, the causes of the other, the sources of events, the history, the structure, the reasons why." But this screed against the explanatory impulse is followed, apparently without any irony, by hundreds of pages of disquisition on the state of world, including an extended discussion of whether humanity should colonize other planets. The result is an enervating novel with all the dramatic tension of an all-day panel discussion. In 1972 Tom Wolfe, with justice, compared the "exquisite" frustration of graduate school with watching "the worst part of the worst Antonioni movie you ever saw, or reading *Mr. Sammler's Planet* at one sitting, or just reading it."

**Chicago, the city** and the university, loomed large in Bellow's consciousness. Chicago is a city of both brains and brawn, host to a magnificent university that trumpeted itself as the repository of the great books, but also of a civic culture often dominated by gangsters. He lived there from the age of nine (he was born in Canada in 1915) and styled himself as the bard of the metropolis with the opening words of his third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*: "I am an American, Chicago born."

Aware of the two faces of Chicago, Bellow wanted to encompass them both in his fiction, to show what happens when eggheads clashed with wise guys. "You were tough or you were nothing," we're told in *The Dean's December*. "In realism and cunning these La Salle Street characters"—roughneck lawyers and businessmen who clash with the dean over legal matters—"were impressive because they had the

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backing of the pragmatic culture of the city, the state, the region, the country. In his brother-in-law's view, the dean had given up the real world to take refuge with philosophy and art. Academics were hacks and phonies." It was part of the genuine nobility of Bellow that he wrote novels to argue against this crude pragmatism, to show how mind and spirit could hold their own in contests with brute force.

Part of what drew Bellow and Shils together in the 1960s was a shared distaste for New Left student radicals, whom both men saw as enemies of the humanistic mission of the university. In his truculent responses to radical students, Bellow as a teacher could be remarkably nasty. When a feminist graduate student tried to raise a political issue in his Joyce seminar, Bellow shouted, "You women's liberationists! All you're going to have to show for your movement ten years from now are sagging breasts!" Artur Sammler shared Bellow's sour views of 1960s America. To give heft to his character's point of view, Bellow imbued him with some of Shils's ideas and even language. Sammler dismissed radical thinkers like Herbert Marcuse as "worthless fellows"—a phrase Shils liked to use.

Yet the overlap between life and fiction is problematic. Shils's disdain for Marcuse has behind it at least the achievement of Shils's own work as a social theorist, which we can appraise as we wish. When Sammler expresses the same ideas, the only grounds we have for judging the merits of these words are from within the novel itself, from Bellow's implicit claim that Sammler is a man of intellectual worth. This was perhaps Bellow's greatest problem: He only rarely figured out how to translate the genuine pleasure that the free play of ideas gave him into convincing, felt narratives. Much more often, he ended up falling between two stools, failing to rival his academic colleagues as thinkers while also losing his way as a novelist. 🐼



# Think Out Loud

An emerging black digital intelligentsia has embraced online technology to change American ideas.

BY **MICHAEL ERIC DYSON**

**TWENTY YEARS AGO**, less than two years after I'd received my doctorate in religion from Princeton, I appeared with Cornel West, Derrick Bell, and bell hooks in an illustration accompanying an article in *The New Yorker* about the rise of a new generation of black public intellectuals. Those were heady times. "A new African American intelligentsia has become part of this country's cultural landscape," wrote literary scholar Michael Bérubé. "It's a development as noticeable as the ascendancy of the New York intellectuals after the Second World War."

The comparison was apt. Like the New York intellectuals, we had come to prominence as a group, our race a defining

feature of identification and struggle in the same way that their Jewishness had supplied inspiration and subject matter. Many New York intellectuals were leftists searching for a Marxist and anti-Stalinist alternative to Soviet communism; many black public intellectuals were also leftists, who grappled with the enchanting, if insular, siege of black nationalism while combating the unheroic ubiquity of white supremacy.

Both cohorts were decidedly public. The social and literary criticism of such New York intellectuals as Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, Philip Rahv, Alfred Kazin, Mary McCarthy, Daniel Bell, and Irving Howe were published

in the pages of political journals like *Partisan Review*, *Dissent*, and, before its 1970s ideological migration to the right, *Commentary*. If Irving Kristol, Sidney Hook, and Norman Podhoretz later pioneered the onset of neoconservatism, black public intellectuals like Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, and Shelby Steele bypassed progressive politics and embraced the stony irreverence of its black conservative counterpart.

Black public intellectuals had our own literary outlets: magazines and journals like *Reconstruction*, *Transition*, and *Emerge*, among others. We published trade books, snagged lucrative speaking gigs, and appeared on highbrow and popular radio and television shows. “Whether lecturing in churches or testifying on Capitol Hill,” as Bérubé put it, we had “the burden and the blessing of a constituency, a public—which is something most so-called public intellectuals can only invoke.”

As with our New York predecessors, there was friction created by our ascension. Bérubé’s story, and a similar one published later that year by Robert Boynton in *The Atlantic*, inspired a slew of contrary responses (Sam Fulwood III, in the *Los Angeles Times*, touted a third renaissance—after the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement—of black scholars who were “the primary beneficiaries of the expansion of education and equal opportunity laws”); rebuttals (Michael Hanchard argued in *The Nation* that Jewish intellectuals weren’t our true precursors, but that instead we descended from a group of black thinkers who argued “over various crises within black communities in New York during the 1930s, ’40s, ’50s”); and, of course, disputes. In *The Village Voice*, Adolph Reed sneered at nearly every black intellectual cited in Bérubé’s essay, arguing that while “Baldwin and Ellison bristled at the Black Voice designation, today’s public intellectuals accept it gladly,” out of a meek, if convoluted, sense of Uncle Tomism. “Maintaining credibility with their real, white audience requires that they be authentically black, that their reports on the heart of darkness ring with verisimilitude.” Besides excoriating us for interpreting black life for white America, Reed accused us of lathering each other with praise: “[Henry Louis] Gates, West, and [Robin] Kelley lavish world-historical superlatives on Dyson, who, naturally enough, expresses comparable judgments about them.” (Ironically, Reed’s accusations of lost academic rigor, celebrity-mongering, and trading one’s intellectual integrity for book deals and assorted commercial inducements echoed my comments, published in the *NEW REPUBLIC* earlier this year, on West.)

Despite the similarities, there were crucial differences between the New York and black public intellectuals. For the most part, the New Yorkers were journalists and critics who wrote and thought outside of academia. We were

nearly all scholars, the first generation of black thinkers to gain broad access to the Ivy League and other elite institutions of higher education. Jewish intellectuals had been excluded from most elite colleges and universities until the late ’30s. They faced quotas because of deeply rooted prejudice—and because of the profound fear of the Jewish intellect. They were savaged by anti-Semitic tropes of greed and the lust for commercial control, and yet they were also viewed as bookish people who valued literacy and what Hannah Arendt famously called “the life of the mind.” The stereotypes used to define us were less flattering: Black people were uninterested in ideas and addicted to ignorance. Our public performance of intelligence—in the media and lecture halls and political forums—contradicted entrenched stereotypes of black stupidity. Paradoxically, our success gave rise to furious criticisms of sullied academic standards—affirmative action as devolution—and compromise of the scholarly craft.

Perhaps the most difficult notion for the mainstream to reckon with was that our generation of black intellectuals was not just racially representative but representative of the wider American intellectual enterprise. And when erudite and persuasive black public intellectuals began to hold forth on race, politics, and culture on *Charlie Rose*, or *All Things Considered*, or the opinion pages of *The New York Times*, we did far more than shatter the myth of black intellectual inferiority. We proved that, as with basketball and music, the dominant American thinkers were black. Which brings us to the present.

**In 2013, Professor** Eddie Glaude, chair of the Center for African American Studies at Princeton, argued in *The New York Times* that black intellectuals ought to be “the moral conscience of their societies: that what we write, say, and do should reflect intelligent efforts to provide a critical account of who we take ourselves to be as a nation.” According to him, black intellectuals had failed in their responsibilities in this regard, to their communities and to a democracy undercut by race. We had in fact reached a “new nadir” for critical thought, one in which too many black intellectuals—those, he claims, who “can spin a phrase and offer a sound bite”—had collectively forgone the “hard work of thinking carefully in public about the crisis facing black America.” His prescription for the shortcomings of the digital age called for black thinkers—including himself, presumably—to “model the value of seriousness amid the white noise of our current media landscape.” These values could only be arrived at if black public intellectuals recommitted to reading and writing and cultivating the “habits of public intellectual work.”

Glaude’s assessment of black intellectual life in America today was striking to me for many reasons, but none more

so than this: The sort of work he called for was in fact being done, by many people, in many places, with great diligence and care. It just wasn't being done by people like him or, to an extent, like me. A new generation had come onto the scene, with pedigrees that didn't include terminal degrees, but who were driving the conversation nonetheless.

*Between the World and Me*, which currently holds the second spot on the *Times*' nonfiction best-seller list, was written not by a professor but a young black thinker who did not graduate from college: Ta-Nehisi Coates. Coates established his reputation not in scholarly publications but through popular blog posts and articles for *The Atlantic*.

Along with Coates, a cohort of what I would like to call the "black digital intelligentsia" has emerged. They wrestle with ideas, stake out political territory, and *lead*, very much in the same way that my generation did, only without needing, or necessarily wanting, a home in the Ivy League—and by making their name online. They include, to name only a few, Jamelle Bouie at Slate, Nikole Hannah-Jones at *The New York Times Magazine*, Joy Reid at MSNBC, Jamilah Lemieux at *Ebony*, and the NEW REPUBLIC's Jamil Smith. Brilliant, eloquent, deeply learned writers and thinkers, they contend with the issues of the day, online, on television, wherever they can. Academics haven't disappeared, of course. Their influence, however, isn't exclusively dependent on validation at the university level. Podcasts, blog posts, social media, and television shows are of vital importance for them. Among this number, I would also include Marc Lamont Hill, James Braxton Peterson, Brittney Cooper, Jelani Cobb, and Melissa Harris-Perry.

This mixture of scholars and thinkers from outside the academy is nothing new. For every black scholar like the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, author of *The Black Bourgeoisie*, or historian John Hope Franklin, who co-wrote *From Slavery to Freedom*, there was Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin; for every academic like St. Clair Drake, there was an independent thinker like Horace Cayton, who teamed with Drake to write *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*; for every Michelle Wallace and bell hooks in the academy, there was Carol Cooper and Jill Nelson outside it (although Nelson temporarily took up residence at the City College of New York); and for every Gerald Early, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, and Patricia Williams in academia, there was Stanley Crouch, Nelson George, and Greg Tate in the trenches.

Yet today's black digital intelligentsia, both academic and otherwise, has found greater communion with its own members than earlier generations did, in large part, I believe, due to the impact of technology, especially the internet. Popular publications like *Emerge* may have brought scholars and thinkers together in the past, but the internet



**Ta-Nehisi Coates**



**Jelani Cobb**



**Melissa Harris-Perry**



**Marc Lamont Hill**



**Jamilah Lemieux**



**Salamishah Tillet**

has provided far more outlets, and far greater likelihood of interaction. In the battle against police brutality, for example, activists from the Black Lives Matter movement have been able to forge direct links with black academics engaged in the intellectual resistance to the unjust use of authority by law enforcement. And a prominent black thinker with 250,000 Twitter followers has a better chance of opening a dialogue with her favorite academic than someone who, in the past, had just sent along a letter.

Despite all the talk of the digital divide—the very real gulf that separates those with access to technology from the black and brown folk who lack it—the black digital intelligentsia has ingeniously used technology to extend and explore thought and fight injustice. Black folk, and particularly well-educated, elite black folk, have taken more quickly and creatively to technology than their white peers, and turned its myriad functions to our social and professional use. “Black Twitter” may be infamous for scorning white women like Rachel Dolezal who think they are black, but it has also pioneered the idea of hashtag activism, such as #SayHerName, which highlighted the invisibility of black women in discussions of police violence in black communities, or #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, with its allusion to tensions between black and white feminists, to offer but two examples.

The black digital intelligentsia uses blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and podcasts in the same way that intellectuals of my generation used publications, television, and speaking engagements: to fight social injustice, to channel black frustration with inequality, to combat white supremacy, to chastise the powers that be for their lack of principled public policies, to hold politicians accountable, to scold the disengagement of the elite, to tell as much of the truth as they can about the worlds they observe and occupy. This is perhaps the most pleasing contradiction of the internet era: It’s nothing new, but it is.

**Another cohort of** black public intellectuals came between the current one and my own. They watched us speak on college campuses or in the media, and our public success showed them that they no longer had to hide, or make incidental, their interests in the various dimensions of black life and society. They engaged the study of slavery and its various aftermaths in a far more sophisticated fashion; they tracked the sociology and ethnography of black urban life; and they examined the literary and musical dimensions of black cultural expression, from pioneering novels to burgeoning jazz studies. They devoted themselves to directors like Spike Lee, John Singleton, and Euzhan Palcy and to the hip-hop of Public Enemy and 2Pac. This wave included scholars like Duke University cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal, who published the groundbreaking

*What the Music Said* in 1999, and Dwight McBride, whose essay collection, *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch*, is a pioneering exploration of the public consequences of gay black male identity.

They were different from us in terms of subject matter, style, and intellectual pursuits, but one thing remained the same: The book was their scholarly sine qua non, the achievement that made all other ambitions possible. Derrick Bell took a public stand for black female professors at Harvard Law School only after the publication of *And We Are Not Saved*. bell hooks “turned up” in the pages of *Esquire*—in an article entitled “Feminist Women Who Like Sex,” in which Tad Friend coined the term “do-me feminism”—after she wrote *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Yale Law School professor Stephen Carter went on *Today* to discuss the complexities of affirmative action because he had written *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*. Today, though, the game’s done changed—in fact, quite a bit.

The book is no longer exclusively dominant in the realm of black ideas. The black digital intelligentsia flourishes in an epistemic ecology in which the scholarly impulse has been sheared by the cutting edges of new technology and the desire for instant knowledge and commentary on current ideas and events. Today, legitimate thinkers take to blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and even Instagram to hash out ideas, test theories, and explore intellectual options. The digital world serves as a forum for a kind of perpetual work in progress, or an extension, or remix, of existing work. For example, scholar Courtney Baker, in advance of her recently published book *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death*, published a blog post entitled “Sandra Bland’s Face” at the Los Angeles Review of Books. The post explored the competing and conflicted uses of Bland’s image as the country attempted to interpret her death in a Texas jail cell—the same kind of work Baker explores in greater detail in her book. While Vincent Brown, a Harvard history professor, explores slavery and death in *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, he explores those same ideas, and others, in multiple media: He is the principal investigator and curator for the online animated thematic map *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761: A Cartographic Narrative* and was producer and director of research for the PBS documentary *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness*. Salamishah Tillet is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the co-founder of a nonprofit that uses art therapy to fight sexual violence against women and girls. But her reach has been extended by her online columns in *The Nation* and her regular appearances on MSNBC. And Peniel Joseph, a history professor at Tufts University and author of *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama*, uses his column

at The Root to amplify his views on politics and current affairs. Even traditional outlets reflect the digital influence: Online newspaper columns and articles now come with a battalion of links to relevant articles, books, and even visual references to support the argument.

Savvy and gifted black scholars like Morehouse College professor and CNN contributor Marc Lamont Hill and Lehigh University professor and MSNBC contributor James Braxton Peterson also take advantage of these new means to address social ills. Hill and Peterson have both published academic books. They also commented on the Ferguson uprisings: Hill in an online column for CNN, Peterson in a Reuters column that was widely circulated on the internet. Both discussed Ferguson, at length, on Twitter. A noteworthy article in an academic journal, or even a popular publication, may still garner the offer to extend one's ideas in a book-length project, but nowadays the process is sped up by measures and leaps of bandwidth: Digital columns may lead to television appearances and thus more quickly to publishing or academic opportunities. Hill's commentary and television reporting, combined with his high profile in social media, helped him land a book deal addressing the rebellion in Ferguson.

Peterson's commentary on a range of social and political issues on MSNBC, for web sites and in social media, significantly elevated his academic prominence.

Beyond the rewards of online success are the intellectual advantages of the immediacy that characterizes the digital vocabulary. The black digital intelligentsia is able to quickly judge where an argument needs to be revised, redrawn, or withdrawn altogether; previously, in my generation, an essay's first draft may have circulated among trusted friends and no further. Now, publication online, as an essay or a tweet, permits strangers, some of whom may be terrifically skilled interpreters, to weigh in on one's scholarship. Airing ideas online offers a potential aid to refining one's argument. It doesn't replace the need to sweat over the work, but it does provide eyeballs and eardrums in ways never before available to thinkers.

More important, black intellectuals who might not easily snag a hearing in traditional editorial circles—maybe they went to a second- or third-tier school, or didn't have access to scholars who might recommend them for plum gigs in the classroom or for publication—might, by the force of their ideas online, arouse the

**The black public intellectuals showed younger thinkers that they no longer had to hide, or make incidental, their interests in black life.**





**Harris-Perry is an elite academic, but she is best known for turning the media into her classroom.**

attention of administrators or faculty in search of new talent. Brittney Cooper, a Rutgers professor who has not yet published a book, is nonetheless a highly regarded commentator on race, culture, politics, and feminism, having made her start with her Crunk Feminist blog. Cooper's rise, and Hill's and Peterson's emergence, too, may have taken more time in an earlier era. Their conspicuous success illustrates the benevolence of digital acclaim. They are simply being smart about showcasing what they can do in a number of venues, or to use the appropriate term, on a number of platforms.

Jelani Cobb, a professor at the University of Connecticut, and the author of three books—on hip-hop, Barack Obama, and essays about black culture—has written brilliantly on contemporary black life. This is befitting his graduate training at Rutgers under David Levering Lewis, a renowned historian and author of two Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies of W.E.B. Du Bois. Long before protests about how the movie *Straight Outta Compton* neglected to broach the vicious misogyny of N.W.A's DJ and producer, Dr. Dre, Cobb had done so in his 2007 essay collection, *The Devil and*

*Dave Chappelle*. As smart and as eloquent as he has been in his books, however, Cobb is a public intellectual based on his prowess as an online columnist, and now, on the strength of those digital efforts, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. If Coates, as has been suggested, is this generation's James Baldwin, then Cobb is surely our era's Ralph Ellison: an erudite and scholarly writer whose sentences are gracefully freighted with a profound knowledge of the range and depth of blackness. While Ellison, Baldwin, and Richard Wright published in magazines like *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and *Look*, Coates and Cobb blog at *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*; same aspiration, same scope of interest, same literary and intellectual pedigree, just a different form.

Perhaps no scholar better embodies the trajectory of the black digital intelligentsia than Melissa Harris-Perry. A professor at Wake Forest and talk-show host on MSNBC, Harris-Perry has written two books; but she is best-known for turning the media into her classroom. She can—and did—school a black president about his “daddy issues” and educate America about why *Magic Mike XXL* is a feminist film. Harris-Perry possesses a formidable capacity to

translate complicated subject matter into understandable language. Consider her withering deconstruction of Michelle Cottle's attack on Michelle Obama in *Politico*, which brought the historical sweep of black female stereotypes in the public sphere to a mainstream format.

She has also brought onto her show, and thus introduced to the nation, as wide and diverse a selection of scholars and intellectuals as has been collected on television before—including transgender writer Janet Mock, Australian feminist critic Chloe Angyal, historian and Schomburg Center director Khalil Gibran Muhammad, and social activist and hip-hop artist Jessica Disu. What's more, Harris-Perry's show has bucked the trend of the Sunday news shows—which, in 2014, featured around 75 percent white guests—by bringing to her round table a majority of guests of color.

At *The Atlantic* Coates called Harris-Perry America's "foremost public intellectual," an assertion that *Politico* journalist Dylan Byers criticized on Twitter, saying it undermined Coates' intellectual credibility. But her academic credentials—a Ph.D. from Duke; her professorships; the two books, the first of which, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*, won awards in 2005 from the American Political Science Association and the National Conference of Black Political Scientists; and having been the youngest scholar to deliver the Du Bois lectures at Harvard—showed that Harris-Perry more than deserved the recognition. "[She is] among the sharpest interlocutors of this historic era—the era of the first black president," Coates wrote. "And none of those interlocutors communicate to a larger public, and in a more original way, than Harris-Perry."

Before the digital era, Hill, Peterson, Cooper, Cobb, and Harris-Perry would certainly have stood out. Their gifts would have distinguished them sufficiently to win a place in the academy, or in whatever venue they chose to aspire. But there is little doubt that their membership in the black digital intelligentsia has procured for each the sort of broad cultural recognition that would not have been possible before.

**Today's generation**, as with my own, must be wary of the pitfalls of public exposure, of too-quick fame, of chasing bright lights rather than doing the sort of work that is sometimes, perhaps even often, quiet, and which runs counter to the digital demands of nonstop, 24-hour connectedness. This is not a new worry. In the Wordsworth sonnet, "The World Is Too Much With Us," we are warned against the gross materialism of the Industrial Revolution—"getting and spending." The black digital intelligentsia must not cede to fluttering activity, to distracting if enticing preoccupations, however measured,

in whatever bandwidth, the necessary time to develop as deeply and profoundly as possible their scholarly gifts and intellectual abilities. By its nature, the scholarly enterprise runs counter to the logic and need of the hour and counsels retreat and withdrawal, saying no.

To be sure, there is danger in the belief that everything—every idea, issue, conflict, disagreement, or difference of perception—can be solved, or even usefully summed up, in 140 characters, or in a posting on Facebook. These are contemporary problems that must be acknowledged. But each generation of black thinkers has confronted intellectual challenges inherent to the age and usefully overcome them. Some things take time, and if the considered opinions of traditional journalism are the first rough draft of history, then digital journalism is the *dry run* of the first draft. There is value, and even political utility, in speedy responses to serious issues that demand thoughtful and critical reflection. But there is value, too, in pulling back for the long view over the long haul.

These two notions need not be in competition; snobbishness—or, to be fair, squeamishness—about weighing in too quickly, too lightly, ignores the challenge that short bursts of intellectual reflection present, the clarity demanded by them, the energy required to express a meaningful thought without relying on obscure erudition or distancing jargon. We pretend that online writing is easy at our own risk. Intellectuals of the digital age, black or otherwise, must remember what all great thinkers know: The best work flourishes when discipline is geared to the task at hand.

The lesson of doing one's work well, and thoroughly, is crucial for young black scholars, both those in our graduate schools and nonacademics striving to find their place online. The virtues of the digital era for black thinkers are many: the archiving of past scholarship that minimizes the time spent in excavating critical historical documents and resources; the communication with other like-minded thinkers, across disciplines, regions, and literally across the world; the vetting of ideas and the practice of intellectual habits with others who harbor similar desires; the interaction with populations that one hopes to study, creating a potentially stronger research feedback loop than might otherwise exist; and contact with inspiring role models who in earlier times may not have been nearly as accessible. While the Luddite in me still loves to serendipitously discover treasures in secondhand bookstores, to smell the decaying papyrus and browse over the cornucopia of cerebral achievement cataloged in texts hewed from trees, I have learned to be (almost) as excited about clicking on the latest essay or blog post from a first-rate thinker leading me through the cadences of critical reflection in the digital gymnasium of the mind. 🐼

# THE REHABILITATIONISTS

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**How a small band of determined legal academics set out to persuade the Supreme Court to undo the New Deal—and have almost won.**

BY BRIAN BEUTLER

**IN NOVEMBER 2013**, a who's who of America's conservative legal establishment descended on the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., for an annual meeting of the Federalist Society, the most influential conservative legal organization in the country. Current presidential candidates Scott Walker and Ted Cruz each made appearances, ingratiating themselves with the influence peddlers in attendance. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was a featured speaker at the event's black-tie-optional dinner.

One of the biggest stars of the conference, however, was neither a Senate-confirmed official nor an elected politician, but a libertarian law professor at Georgetown named Randy Barnett. This wasn't Barnett's first turn as a Federalist Society eminence, but his reception that year was especially rapturous.

"The younger people, the people in law school, they seem to be gravitating toward people like Randy," said attendee Josh Blackman, an associate law professor at the South Texas College of Law and a close friend of Barnett's. "When he gets off the stage he's mobbed. ... There's a crowd of people five or six feet deep surrounding him."

Barnett had been invited to participate in a lunchtime debate against J. Harvie Wilkinson, a Reagan-appointed judge

serving on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, on the topic of whether courts are too deferential to legislatures. The event was sold out.

Thinking back on that day recently, Barnett marveled at his emergence as a celebrity. "One of the leaders of the Federalist Society—one of the senior staff—said clearly I had the room," Barnett told me. "It wasn't that I beat J. Harvie Wilkinson in a debate—who knows?—it's just that the room was with me. The room would not have been with me ten years ago."

Back then, Barnett was one of a handful of academics on the fringes of conservative legal thought. Today, their views are taking hold within the mainstream of our politics. Barnett and his compatriots represent the vanguard of a lasting shift toward greater libertarian influence over our law schools and, increasingly, throughout our legal system. They're building networks for students and young lawyers and laying the foundation for a more free-market cast of federal judges in the next presidential administration. Their goal is to fundamentally reshape the courts in ways that will have profound effects on society.

Barnett's political philosophy took root when he was a child. His father was a conservative, and he became one, too.



When he was a junior at Northwestern University, one of his professors introduced him to libertarianism, as distinct from the more staid Republicanism of his youth. While attending law school at Harvard, a classmate took him to New York to meet the famed but controversial theorist Murray Rothbard, an encounter that inspired his lifelong affiliation with the libertarian movement and its prominent institutions, like the Cato Institute. His lone professional detour outside that world was a four-year stint as a prosecutor in Illinois. After that, he obtained a fellowship at the University of Chicago under Richard Epstein, a giant of American law in the twentieth century and a patron saint of modern libertarian scholars.

Barnett's career as an academic began far from the center of the action, however, at Chicago-Kent College of Law, where he became a professor in 1982. "It was a good school," Barnett told me, "but one reason it was a bummer to teach there was no one had ever heard of it."

Eventually, Barnett clawed his way to Boston University, and then to Georgetown, where he joined the faculty in 2006. ("I love the situation here," he said of his current digs. "I don't need to be on the outs.") But even as his career took off, his legal views remained decidedly anti-establishment. Barnett believes the Constitution exists to secure inalienable property and contract rights for individuals. This may sound like a bland and inconsequential opinion, but if widely adopted by our courts and political systems it would prohibit or call into question basic governmental protections—minimum wages, food-safety regulations, child-labor laws—that most of us take for granted. For nearly a century now, a legal counterculture has insisted that the whole New Deal project was a big, unconstitutional error, and Barnett is a big part of that movement today.

**The main object** of this group's obsession is the Supreme Court's 1905 decision in *Lochner v. New York*. Joseph Lochner was the owner of a bakery in Utica, New York, at the turn of the last century, who sought relief from the Bakeshop Act, under which he was fined for allowing an employee to work more than 60 hours a week. He believed that the act's workplace-safety rationale was in fact a government-sanctioned tool for the bakers union to attack nonunion bakeries like his own and that it deprived him and his employees of their right to enter into their own contracts. The Supreme Court narrowly agreed. Its 5–4 ruling struck down the law and, more importantly, provided the rationale justices would use to invalidate other legislation over the course of a generation.

For decades now, legal academics and elites have considered the early twentieth century one of the Supreme Court's darkest eras. *Lochner*, it's been viewed, belongs with *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the 1857 decision holding that neither slaves nor freedmen were U.S. citizens, and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 decision upholding racial segregation under the separate-but-equal doctrine, in a Malebolge of rejected rulings.

In 1936, after the Supreme Court struck down a New York minimum-wage law, one of a series of New Deal measures it ruled unconstitutional, a dejected Franklin D. Roosevelt complained to the press that the Court had created "a 'no-man's land' where no government—state or federal—can function."

A year later, after Roosevelt had been reelected overwhelmingly on a New Deal platform, the Supreme Court effectively repudiated *Lochner* when a 5–4 majority upheld Washington's state minimum-wage law for women. "More than 25 years ago we set forth the applicable principle in these words, after referring to the cases where the liberty guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment had been broadly described," the Court ruled. "But it was recognized in the cases cited, as in many others, that freedom of contract is a qualified, and not an absolute, right. There is no absolute freedom to do as one wills or to contract as one chooses." In addition to forming the basis of the modern American social contract, this decision was a hard-fought victory over fierce opposition to government regulation by employers and property owners. The enduring postwar political consensus about the proper role of government may have masked that opposition, but it was never completely vanquished.

All libertarians want to fight federal regulations in Congress and the executive branch. But Barnett and his allies think courts should be empowered to throw regulations out even if political majorities support them. These *Lochner* revivalist professors have established beachheads at law schools across the country. In 2002, UCLA law professor Eugene Volokh founded a blog, The Volokh Conspiracy, as a hub for libertarian ideas, including *Lochner* revisionism. Today, it has become the most prominent academic legal blog in the country and now publishes under the auspices of *The Washington Post*. It boasts nearly two dozen contributing professors and mainlines detailed and informed libertarian legal arguments to thousands of the nation's top lawyers, law students, clerks, judges, and opinion-makers every day.

The contributors to The Volokh Conspiracy teach at the University of Minnesota, Northwestern, Emory, Duke, and elsewhere. Several hold positions at George Mason University's law school, which is famous for its conservative faculty and, in 36 short years, has rocketed to prominence as one of the 50 best law schools in the country. In 2011, GMU law professor and Volokh Conspiracy contributor David Bernstein published a book titled *Rehabilitating Lochner*, and that's exactly what he, Barnett, and their contemporaries have been attempting to do.

That project aims to extend the reach of their dissident school of thought beyond academia and into the workings of government. In 1991, two former members of the Reagan administration, Chip Mellor and Clint Bolick, founded the Institute for Justice, a libertarian public-interest law firm now based in Arlington, Virginia, with \$350,000 a year in seed money from the oil and gas magnate Charles Koch. They've challenged state licensing laws on behalf of hair braiders,

florists, and other tradespeople across the country, but have also undertaken loftier crusades, including a doomed effort to overturn the Davis-Bacon Act, which requires that contractors pay their employees competitive wages on government-funded projects.

The Volokh Conspiracy, too, was designed not just as a place where law professors could talk with each other, but as a platform from which to broadcast libertarian ideas to a wider audience. Barnett joined the blog as a contributor in 2004. In its early days, its views could be read as a counterpoint to prevailing conservative legal thought. In the summer of 2005, for example, when the overwhelming majority of conservative elites were celebrating John Roberts's nomination to the Supreme Court, Barnett interjected with a typically contrarian but in some ways fundamental caveat. "Who is John Roberts?" he asked in a Volokh Conspiracy post. "We know nothing about what he stands for."

**Few professors see** their academic work reflected in the public realm, and fewer still after cutting so aggressively against the grain. In 2004, when Barnett argued his first and only case before the Supreme Court, *Lochner* was a distant specter, and libertarian influence over the law more generally was hard to detect. The case concerned two women, Angel Raich and Diane Monson, who used marijuana to treat their chronic medical conditions. Monson's homegrown medical marijuana plants were seized and destroyed by federal agents pursuant to the Controlled Substances Act. Barnett contended the law was an overbroad application of the Commerce Clause to regulate economic activity. He lost 6–3. The following year, the Rehnquist Court dealt libertarians another major blow when it ruled 5–4 in *Kelo v. New London* that the Connecticut city could use its eminent domain powers to condemn private property and hand it over to private developers. The plaintiffs in that case were represented by the Institute for Justice.

To anyone who lived through *Bush v. Gore* it might seem strange that a judiciary as conservative as the Rehnquist and Roberts Courts would rule for the government so regularly. But the dominant strain of conservative legal thought for the last half-century has largely been shaped by the right's backlash to the social revolution stemming from the 1960s and the Warren and Burger Courts' use of the Constitution to further progressive ends like desegregation and access to abortion. For conservatives, the main villain of the last 50 years has been creeping liberal judicial activism and a willingness to overturn legislative action. Conservative legal scholars and jurists like Robert Bork held that judges should refrain from projecting personal or political values into their judicial opinions. This principle became a cornerstone of traditional conservative legal thought, but it effectively created a presumption that democratically enacted laws are constitutional. Such a restrained judicial philosophy makes it difficult for judges to void properly enacted laws like the Controlled Substances Act.

But it has been nearly 30 years since Chief Justice Warren E. Burger retired. For many younger conservatives, the Court's cardinal sin isn't *Brown v. Board of Education* or even *Roe v. Wade*. And Barnett and his allies have helped make many conservatives more comfortable with the idea of judicial activism.

With five offices around the country, a legal clinic training students at the University of Chicago Law School, and a staff of nearly 100, the Institute for Justice has become a proving ground for aspiring, ideologically committed lawyers. Every year, the group sends lawyers to law schools around the country to give presentations on public-interest

## ***Lochner* revivalist professors have established beachheads at law schools across the country.**

law and recruit students into its ranks. "It's certainly done with the intent to make sure that libertarian-minded law students know who we are and what we have to offer," Clark Neily, a senior attorney at the Institute for Justice, said of the group's outreach. Each summer, a couple dozen clerks join the group in its Beltway headquarters and state offices. From there, these young lawyers typically move on to more traditional clerkships at law firms and federal courts—one former Institute for Justice clerk worked for Chief Justice Roberts from 2008 to 2009—and when the Institute hires new staff attorneys, it often culls from the ranks of these same pupils.

"Ten to 15 years ago, conservatives who were in positions of influence—educating young lawyers, or in a position to hire them to politically desirable positions—were unified by what you might call Borkian restraint, or knee-jerk deference," Neily said. "What has really changed in the last four or five years is a real skepticism, particularly but not exclusively among young law students, toward this kind of acquiescence to whatever government does."

In 2013, the Institute for Justice enjoyed one of its biggest successes to date. It prevailed in a federal appeals court on behalf of the Benedictine monks of St. Joseph Abbey in Louisiana, who had sued for the right to sell handmade, inexpensive funeral caskets after the state Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors ordered them to desist. Like *Lochner*, the case represents a challenge to government health and safety rules. And like *Lochner*, it could theoretically become the basis for invalidating scores of unrelated business regulations. The Supreme Court declined to hear the state board's appeal in that case, but different appeals courts have taken different views of this general dispute, which means the

Supreme Court—now more conservative than it was a decade ago—may well step in to settle it at some point.

Each success on behalf of an everyman struggling against the government serves the libertarian cause well, but these victories pale in comparison to the role that President Obama and the Affordable Care Act have played in convincing mainstream conservatives to give judicial activism a second look.

Barnett has been at the forefront of the fight against Obamacare, and the 2012 constitutional challenge to the law's insurance-coverage mandate was largely his brainchild. He argued that requiring private citizens to purchase health insurance against their will exceeded Congress's powers. A clearly conflicted Chief Justice Roberts ultimately bent over backwards to construe the law in a constitutional way, out of deference to the elected branches, enraging the entire right. If Barnett viewed Roberts as an enigma back in 2005, it's clear to him now that he finds the chief justice's approach to the law deeply wanting, and many conservatives agree with him.

"Selecting judges with the judicial mindset of 'judicial restraint' and 'deference' to the majoritarian branches leads to the results we witnessed," Barnett warned in another Volokh Conspiracy post this summer, after Roberts once again saved the health care law. To Barnett, the proper role for judges isn't modest or deferential at all, and it's time for Republicans to start promoting conservatives who will embrace a more activist approach on the bench. "If conservative Republicans want a different performance from the judiciary in the future," Barnett argued, "they must vet their presidential candidates to see whether they understand this point."

Barnett's opposition to Obamacare made him a hero to the conservative legal establishment. It was for this reason that he was greeted with such enthusiasm at the Federalist Society meeting in Washington two years ago. And it's what catapulted his ideas about the proper role of judges fully into the mainstream.

**To dismiss the** debate between libertarians and traditional conservatives over *Lochner* as an academic sideshow is to misunderstand the stakes. "A full-fledged return to *Lochner* would put a constitutional cloud over a whole host of laws that we all take for granted today," said Sam Bagenstos, a liberal constitutional scholar at the University of Michigan who has argued cases before the Supreme Court. "Laws guaranteeing workers the right to join a union without being fired, and the right to earn a minimum wage and receive overtime if working more than 40 hours a week, laws protecting worker safety, and laws protecting workers and customers against discrimination based on race or other protected statuses, just for starters."

I asked Barnett whether the social welfare laws on the books today would be permitted under his reading of the Constitution. "Probably not at the federal level," he said.

That's why Barnett and his contemporaries prefer to root their arguments in specific injustices rather than categorical

abstractions. Why *shouldn't* bakers be allowed to work more than 60 hours a week, or individuals be allowed to remain uninsured? Why *should* the government be allowed to regulate out of existence my right to hail a driver or your right to rent a stranger's house for a weekend?

Even if you believe these regulations are the result of collusion between government and industry cronies, that doesn't mean they should be constitutionally prohibited, or even that they have no merit. Once courts are empowered to invalidate sordid government regulations, they are also on a slippery slope to tossing out standards that serve useful purposes—in part because some laws that appear unprincipled at a glance actually do important work. If an Airbnb customer and a hotel guest are each badly burned in preventable fires, the hotel guest is likely to have a great deal more recourse—and would have government regulation to thank.

That's not a persuasive rationale in Barnett's mind. "You should have your own insurance," he told me emphatically. "You should be insured. You should have health insurance, you should probably have life insurance, disability insurance. I insure myself." (The irony of this position should be lost on no one—had Barnett's Obamacare challenge succeeded, 16 million fewer people would have health insurance today.)

**The movement to** rehabilitate *Lochner* now faces a crucial test: Can it endure after the spasms of resistance to the Obama presidency have quieted, or will it burn out along with them? When I put this question to Barnett, he demurred. "I didn't really have a strategy to get us this far," he said.

Nevertheless, Barnett believes that he and his contemporaries have laid a solid foundation for turning back the legal clock to *Lochner*. "I don't think it's top-down," Barnett said of the overall approach. "You don't get Justice Whatever without having a huge bottom-up."

That bottom-up effect has arguably had a big impact on the judiciary already. The 2010 *Citizens United* decision upended the government's ability to limit campaign spending by corporations. In 2012, four conservative Supreme Court justices declared, in a dissenting opinion, that the entire Affordable Care Act should be vacated as an improper use of Congress's power to regulate interstate commerce. This was *Lochner* cloaked in fresh garb: The government can't tell me how many hours I can work at a bakery; the government can't tell me to buy insurance. Roberts salvaged the law, but on the basic point about compulsion, he agreed with Barnett, too. It wasn't just four conservative justices who bought into a kind of *Lochnerism*. It was all five.

Ultimately, the success of any bottom-up movement will depend as much on voters as on legal scholars and the activists they inform. The biggest setback for *Lochnerians* could be an establishment Republican like Jeb Bush winning the presidency and cannibalizing the grassroots right's enthusiasm for taking apart the Obama-era administrative

state. A Hillary Clinton presidency would put off a *Lochner* revival for another four or eight years, but it would keep the fires of opposition to big government raging in the meantime. Bush, by contrast, is an advocate of judicial restraint, and once he started appointing traditional conservatives to the bench, it would be difficult to stop him. But Barnett and the *Lochner*ians hope that the right's antipathy toward Obama, the Affordable Care Act, and the Roberts Court's interventions to salvage it will give a Republican president no choice but to move in a new direction.

**“Who is John Roberts?”  
Barnett asked in a  
Volkh Conspiracy post.  
“We know nothing  
about what he stands for.”**

Conservatives, Barnett said, “have to decide, ‘Well, why am I furious? What am I furious at? ... They put John Roberts on the court. I didn’t put him on the court. Bill Clinton didn’t put him on the court. George Bush put him on the court, and he was considered by the Ted Cruzes of this world as a superstar, and then look what he does. There’s something wrong with this picture.’”

The hope is that this anger propels a libertarian-minded president into office and inspires him to nominate less restrained judges. The next president will likely have the opportunity to appoint at least one, and possibly as many as four Supreme Court justices. Ruth Bader Ginsburg is now 82. Stephen Breyer is 77. Anthony Kennedy and Antonin Scalia are both 79. If one of these justices retires under a Republican president, who then appoints a *Lochner*ian to fill the vacancy, it will change the Court profoundly. If more than one of them steps down, the Court will become unrecognizable.

If that plan fails, Barnett’s cause will be set back years, and the project of pushing his ideas into the Republican mainstream will continue sub rosa. But Barnett has influential allies.

In July, the conservative columnist George Will made a provocative new demand of the next Republican president: “Ask this of potential court nominees: Do you agree that *Lochner* correctly reflected the U.S. natural rights tradition and the Ninth and Fourteenth Amendments’ affirmation of unenumerated rights?”

Thanks to the efforts to grow their ranks, there are a few suitable Supreme Court candidates already. In his column, Will identified one: Texas Supreme Court Justice Don Willett. In a footnote to a recent opinion, Willett celebrated the fact that “a wealth of contemporary legal scholarship is

reexamining *Lochner*, its history and correctness as a matter of constitutional law.”

As for Will’s proposed litmus test, a few Republican presidential candidates this cycle have passed it. Rand Paul has praised the *Lochner* decision explicitly multiple times, most recently at the Heritage Action Conservative Policy Summit this January. “I’m not a judicial restraint guy,” he told an audience of avowed judicial activism foes. “I’m a judicial activist when it comes to *Lochner*. I’m a judicial activist when it comes to the New Deal.”

In August, Rick Perry boasted on Twitter that he was “proud” to have nominated Willett to the Texas Supreme Court, calling the justice “a model of conservative jurisprudence.” Whether they know it or not, both politicians are already speaking a language Barnett and his libertarian contemporaries have successfully injected into the mainstream of conservative strategic thought.

These are dark horse candidates, but any Republican president will face much more pressure than George W. Bush ever did to nominate the kind of judges Paul or Perry might. Another candidate, Scott Walker, is more of an enigma, but he’s an equally doctrinaire opponent of economic regulation and has a liaison to the pro-*Lochner* world in George Will’s wife, Mari, who is an adviser to his campaign. History shows it’s difficult to stop a determined president from shaping the courts to reflect a particular conception of law. “There was a whole series of hot-button issues that the Reagan administration decided were exceptionally important in articulating the right kind of judicial restraint,” Bagenstos explained. “Affirmative action was one. The exclusionary rule under the Fourth Amendment was another. ... So they had a whole hit list of legal principles that they thought were misguided, which got the Constitution wrong, and so they worked really hard to explain why the decisions they thought were wrong, were wrong.

“It influenced the way they looked at judges, and once they put those judges on the lower court they started to put that agenda into action,” he continued. “Sometimes the Supreme Court went along with the more aggressive lower-court judges, and sometimes they didn’t. But you had this dynamic that things liberals thought they had won in the Burger and Warren Courts were not secure and suddenly were being contested.”

This is a lesson every Democrat, and really every establishment-minded Republican, should relearn, because a president who adopted the same model, with the goal of rehabilitating *Lochner*, could erode the legal and administrative foundations of the past century in a matter of years. A rule change undertaken by Senate Democrats last Congress eliminated the filibuster for nominees to lower courts, and by the time the next president is sworn into office, three sitting Supreme Court justices will be over 80 years old.

“The next Republican president will have a choice,” Bagenstos said. “I don’t know which way that choice is going to come out.”

To Randy Barnett the choice is obvious. 🐘



# CRACKING THE CARTEL

Don't pay NCAA football  
and basketball players.

BY **THEODORE ROSS**

**FOR 80 YEARS**, the Heisman Trophy has been awarded annually to the college football player “whose performance best exhibits the pursuit of excellence with integrity.” Athletes from the University of Southern California, my alma mater, have won six: the tailbacks Mike Garrett, Charles White, and Marcus Allen; quarterbacks Carson Palmer and Matt Leinart; and O.J. Simpson, who defies mere positional categorization. Reggie Bush won the Heisman in 2005 but returned it several years later, when evidence surfaced that he and his family had accepted “improper benefits,” an NCAA term for money.

USC displays its Heismans in Heritage Hall, a 70,000-square-foot, on-campus complex, along with commemorations of the school’s 422 Olympic athletes and 123 national team championships, its heavier-weight financial donors, a few coaches, the best members of its woebegone basketball squads, and Marion Morrison, a.k.a. John Wayne, who played two seasons of football for the Trojans in 1925 and 1926.

Heritage Hall is also home to some of the infrastructure and amenities directed at the athletes: offices and meeting

rooms, a two-story lobby and museum space known as the Hall of Champions, a “spa-like female athlete lounge featuring a kitchenette” (to borrow language from the DLR Group, the firm that oversaw a recent renovation), a \$3 million sports-themed dining hall, a golf simulation lab, a workout room for the rowing team, a commercial laundry, a fully equipped television studio and editing suite, and other facilities. In its day-spa-meets-tech-campus-meets-pro-franchise grandeur, Heritage Hall serves as a two-pronged collegiate symbol: of the wider university’s formidable success, and of the materialist extremes that sport can achieve. Money and privilege practically ooze from the wall joints. It is on the campus but not necessarily of it.

In 2002, as a student in USC’s Master of Professional Writing program (not making that name up), I took a part-time job with Student-Athlete Academic Services (SAAS), an athletic department adjunct “committed to the growth of the total student athlete.” My job was to shepherd the athletes through the mind-numbing exigencies of Composition 101

and 102; our sessions were conducted in the basement level of Heritage Hall. (Today, most of this work takes place in a newer, even fancier building, the John McKay Center, named after a head football coach from one of the Trojans' halcyon championship-winning eras.)

During my time with SAAS, I encountered a wide range of athletic archetypes: foreign-born tennis players struggling with English grammar; SoCal water polo dudes who excelled at swimming and skateboarding but not essays; a smattering of cheerfully inarticulate volleyball and baseball players and swimmers; and of course, the breadwinners and rainmakers: the football players.

Let us assume to be already in evidence the standard disclaimers about good and bad apples, smart and dumb, the motivated and the apathetic. With very few exceptions, I liked the athletes. They were unfailingly polite and appreciative, mildly apologetic when they didn't do their work, and, overall, behaved as well as one can expect of exceptionally fit and good-looking young men and women enrolled at a fair-weather

## Transferring cash to the players would not address the basic problems of big-time college athletics.

school not too far from the beach. In the main, however, they also struck me as unprepared for college-level work. What's more, and again in general, the football players appeared the least troubled by this fact, and the least willing to rectify it.

These were not, I should point out, stupid young men. Football at this level presents highly complex strategic and tactical challenges. Dull minds, even ones blessed with superb athletic ability, will struggle. But practically all of the dozens of football players with whom I interacted resented their schoolwork, or to be specific, the requirement of it. They viewed it as a particularly onerous element of the raw deal that was playing collegiate-level professional sports for free. Without quite saying it, they viewed amateurism as a farce, a predatory bargain struck long before any of them had nailed their first slow-moving quarterback. They could live with the exploitation, it seemed, but certain things fell beneath their dignity, compulsory study being one of them.

The billion-dollar business ventures currently referred to as College Football and College Basketball have come under increased scrutiny of late, by a variety of actors, judicial, administrative, journalistic, and otherwise. The games and their related by-products—ESPN, video games, tight-fitting

workout clothes, electrolyte-supplementing beverages—constitute a system of human resource extraction, one in which already wealthy universities derive enormous benefit from young men who don't share in the riches they create. That the players are owed compensation for their part in these business concerns is today, I believe, considered the ethical norm by the majority of reporters, academics, and sports professionals—basically everyone but the NCAA—having supplanted the earlier prevailing belief in the nebulous virtues of amateurism.

"In economics, we are not allowed to use the word 'exploitation.' That's for the sociologists. But if we were, [revenue-generating sports] would be a good place for it," said Charles Clotfelter, a Duke professor and author of *Big-Time Sports in American Universities*. "If you work for the NCAA these days, you have to keep a straight face to say a lot of things."

College athletics has, since its inception, been rife with academic indiscretions large and small. Among the latest, although not necessarily the worst, to be documented occurred at the University of North Carolina. In October 2014, an investigation conducted by an independent law firm found that for 18 years, more than 1,000 members of the men's football and basketball teams had benefited from what was dubbed a "shadow curriculum." Athletes, the investigators reported, were allowed—encouraged—to register for "paper classes" that involved "no interaction with a faculty member, required no class attendance or course work other than a single paper, and resulted in consistently high grades." These athletes, the investigators noted, had been steered toward these courses by counselors from UNC's Academic Support Program for Student Athletes, Chapel Hill's counterpart to SAAS.

In the courts, *O'Bannon v. NCAA*, a class-action suit named after former UCLA basketball player Ed O'Bannon, seeks compensation for players for the use of their likenesses in video games. A little more than a year ago, the judge in the suit ruled in favor of the players; the NCAA has appealed, but in response, the video-game company Electronic Arts, a co-defendant in the suit, has already discontinued its NCAA series of college football video games. A single case, perhaps, but it demonstrates the instability of the status quo and the shift in thinking with regard to collegiate-athlete compensation, which now seems appropriate, and more importantly, inevitable—the only right-minded way forward.

Embedded in this idea is the conviction that the inequity of withholding money from players is the primary structural problem of the collegiate sporting landscape. Make the athletes whole and the academic chicanery, the ribald recruiting competition, and the reign of the unaccountable coach-king with his lucrative shoe contracts and loudspeaker voice will vanish. The subjugation of the player, in this thinking, is the solitary sin of college sports.

I disagree. Division I athletes are being cheated of their just due by the present system, and they would undoubtedly be aided by the diversion of money their way. But the transfer of cash from the NCAA and the universities to the players would not address the basic problems of big-time college athletics.

# \$156,647

**MEDIAN AMOUNT A DIVISION I SCHOOL SPENDS ON A SCHOLARSHIP FOOTBALL PLAYER, AS OF 2013**



# \$14,979

**AMOUNT SPENT ON A FULL-TIME STUDENT**

Why would it? What makes us believe that the creation of an explicitly professional class of student athletes (as opposed to today's implicit class) would change anything? How would payments to the players mitigate the excesses of Heritage Hall or any of the other walled citadels of sport hogging valuable real estate on our campuses?

Taylor Branch, in "The Shame of College Sports," his 2011 evisceration of the NCAA published in *The Atlantic*, writes, "The tragedy at the heart of college sports is not that some college athletes are getting paid, but that more of them are not." But is it? To me, the tragedy at the heart of college sports is college sports. Paying the players would only ensure the continuation of athletic programs as currently constructed. Everything would remain as it is, with the freakishly lucrative enterprises that are Division I college football and basketball nestled awkwardly within our higher education system. Payment would, in fact, give the system needed space to grow, protect it with a thin veneer of legitimacy, and free everyone from the constraints that have lately burdened the good time of college athletics.

The NCAA is a cartel. Its operating model—as Lawrence Kahn describes in his aptly titled 2007 *Journal of Economic*

*Perspectives* article, "Markets: Cartel Behavior and Amateurism in College Sports"—is based on limiting pay to athletes and forcing them to maintain their amateur status. The term "cartel" is a loaded one, of course, but its connotations suggest the limits of what paying the players could conceivably do.

**I talked on** occasion with athletes at SAAS about the workings of the cartel that drew profit from their play. These conversations inevitably turned to whether or not the athletes should be paid. One instance stands out: A group of young men from the football team had been consigned to Heritage Hall for an afternoon study session, their attendance, I believe, some sort of punishment for a missed class or an act of defiance toward their coaches. Instead of reading, they engaged in a lively chat about the ethics of not paying the players in what we were calling the "money sports." The players did the work, they said, risked body and brain, so that USC might reap glory and heaping piles of loot from their labor. The loyalists in the seats chanted the names of star players, not those of their well-compensated coaches. The

ludicrous centurion on his white horse mascot, the USC Song Girls, the ticket-buying partisans in cardinal and gold: They honored the players and only the players. Yet the players were paid only in acclaim, currency of some value in our society, but not of the sort that does much for a car payment.

Elite college-level athletics in the revenue-generating sports are among the very few sectors of working society that diverge from the American idea that labor yields pay. (And I write this as someone who got his start in magazine publishing via an unpaid internship.) Here, instead, cash takes another form, via a sort of ivory-tower alchemy. No longer offered as mere legal tender, compensation is transformed, via education, into a vehicle for the athlete's "social betterment"—college is good for you, socially and personally, better even than money, or so goes the argument. That such fiscal chemistry occurs in pursuits dominated by African American men from low-income families should neither surprise nor please anyone. The NCAA and its member schools like to equate education with improvement, and I'm not about to argue the connection between the two—but it's also a convenient justification for unpaid work.

In a paper published on the web site College Athletics Clips, Towson University professor Howard Nixon, author of *The Athletic Trap: How College Sports Corrupted the Academy*, writes:

In big-time college sports today, critics often attribute an assortment of problems to commercialism, including a financial arms race with no end in sight, academic misconduct that makes a mockery of the idea of the student

athlete, and various other breaches of academic and athletic integrity that raise serious questions about the purposes of ostensible higher education institutions.

I see no reason to believe that the commercialism and the pedagogical mockery would subside if the players were paid. You could, I suppose, sidestep the entire issue by dropping the requirement that the athletes go to school. Given the option, many football and basketball players might, of their own accord, pursue a college degree, using the proceeds of their athletic labor to pay for it. Others would not. Either way, if the goal is to curb the scholarly scofflaw-ism—the commercialism still isn't going anywhere—logic suggests that the players be allowed to choose to study or no. Of course, having well-paid college athletes opt into or out of the classroom may be good for them, and fair, but it can hardly be said to be for the benefit of the wider college population, the educational system, or the rest of society. The best that could be said for this approach would be that it would eliminate the hypocrisy of fake student athletes of the kind periodically uncovered by reporters and whistle-blowers and bemoaned as a scandal.

**What shape might** (and must) a pay system take? What impact would it have on this unsavory business? Certainly some of those employees and participants would gain: Earning money for one's labor is always better than not. But the overall ramifications might be less positive than compassionate folks like Taylor Branch believe. An open market at the college level would, in the abstract, seem the most equitable approach: Give supply and demand free rein to deliver its judgments and all will be well. Schools could pay individual players based on the share of revenue derived from their talents relative to other players. The payments might vary according to the size and scope of the local sports market, plus the specific deal each young man (and there is little reason to think that the gender inequities in professional sports would not be replicated) is able to swing. But in general, each year's Heisman Trophy contender and charismatic gridiron swell would be assessed and paid his worth. The current faux-amateur system, of course, diverts the better part of this player's money in a multiplicity of directions. The coaches and athletic directors get their taste, as do various athletic department functionaries and the support staff (including SAAs folks like me); and we mustn't forget the worthy dependents in the non-revenue (which include women's) sports.

But the market-based approach, when examined closely, is a muddle. By what method will the schools determine the value of an individual player? And an unsettling corollary: What obligations do they have to the players who, put bluntly, aren't worth all that much?

Even at the elite level, much of the athletic talent is essentially fungible. Compare, for example, USC with a nearby school like San Diego State University. Both institutions recruit, at least in part, from a similar pool of players. USC is a perennial football power with eleven national championships.

## FACT-CHECKING THE FLUTIE FACTOR

The animating myth of the pay system is that big-time college sports are good for colleges, a belief best embodied by "The Flutie Factor." In 1984, Doug Flutie, a Boston College quarterback, threw a last-second touchdown pass for a victory over Miami. A surge in applications the following year was widely attributed to him and also used to correlate athletic triumph and institutional prestige.

However, a 2013 report by the Delta Cost Project, a Washington, D.C., think tank, found that The Flutie Factor was "often cited but largely exaggerated" and called the impact of athletic success "typically quite modest." Sports can improve a school—but so can a new building, better professors, or increased diversity.

SDSU is a fine school that plays some serious football, but it is, with apologies, a lesser force in the athletic firmament. The disparities in achievement between the two programs, however, cannot be attributed to, say, a starting Trojan linebacker without NFL potential on one squad and a starting Aztec linebacker without NFL potential on the other. Each is a high-level athlete, but both could effectively be swapped without impacting the outcomes for either team. Even in football, and at the risk of cliché, championships are won by the superstars. And if you are entirely replaceable, can you really be said to be contributing to the financial success of the program? In short, are you worth anything?

The best players on the best teams hold undeniable financial value because they are *rare*. More than 30,000 men play NCAA Division I football and basketball each year. A little more than 300 are drafted into the NFL and NBA. There are very few Marcus Mariotas, the University of Oregon quarterback who won last year's Heisman, walking the planet. Gifted but unheralded teammates like Andre Yruretagoyena, an offensive lineman, are far easier to locate and develop. Or another, more personal example: Among the athletes I spoke with about pay while at USC was a highly recruited freshman safety who had earned, among other notices, Super Prep All-Dixie honors as a high school senior in Florida. Unfortunately, he didn't quite prove out at the collegiate level: He was gone from the football team after his sophomore year. In a supply-and-demand system, the value of a premium player rises, while that of the borderline one plummets. Not to zero, likely—don't sweat it, Andre—but not necessarily much above it. No one is suggesting that a Division I player would be asked to pay to play. Even the most marginal team member would still likely merit a scholarship. But the basic point remains: The current system deprives the best players of significant money, not the lesser ones. Let's be clear about who's really being exploited.

Not every college would be able to afford to compete on the open market. Think USC versus SDSU again. The Trojans are a national brand as well as a national power; an expensive private school, with wealthy alumni and boosters, and an iconic sports institution that people around the country support by buying t-shirts, caps, foam fingers, and tiny replica football helmets. The Aztecs possess few of these attributes and wouldn't necessarily have the money to stay in the big-time game, although they might opt to do so even without it—a 2013 analysis by *USA Today* found that only 23 of 228 public school Division I athletic departments ran in the black. (Private schools don't have to disclose their finances.) Duke's Clotfelter dismissed these figures as arbitrary accounting practices. Basically, the schools can choose to appear to lose money if the profit-making football teams are expected to pay for the money-losing tennis squads. "It's a bogus thing to even be talking about losing money," he said. True or no, it doesn't prevent 16 of those 23 departments from taking financial subsidies from their schools, often in the form of student fees.

Some schools might decide not to try. "You'd have teams that fail and go under," said Andrew Zimbalist, an economist at Smith College. A smaller, wealthier core, likely composed of the

teams in the so-called Power Five conferences (the ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, and SEC), would emerge. But even within those conferences, some schools might decide competing wasn't worth it, and they'd move down to Division II.

An early version of this fiscal sorting may already have begun. An NCAA vote in August 2014 afforded the Power Five increased autonomy over the rules governing the treatment of players. For example, Alabama, which plays in the SEC, can now offer its athletes better health insurance and scholarships than, say, the College of Charleston, which competes in the Colonial Athletic Association. Last December, in a harbinger of what might happen in an open market, the University of Alabama-Birmingham, which plays in Conference USA, a "mid-major" in the current parlance, announced the termination of its football program, citing insufficient financial resources. "As we look at the evolving landscape of NCAA football, we see expenses only continuing to increase," UAB president Ray Watts said. "Football is simply not

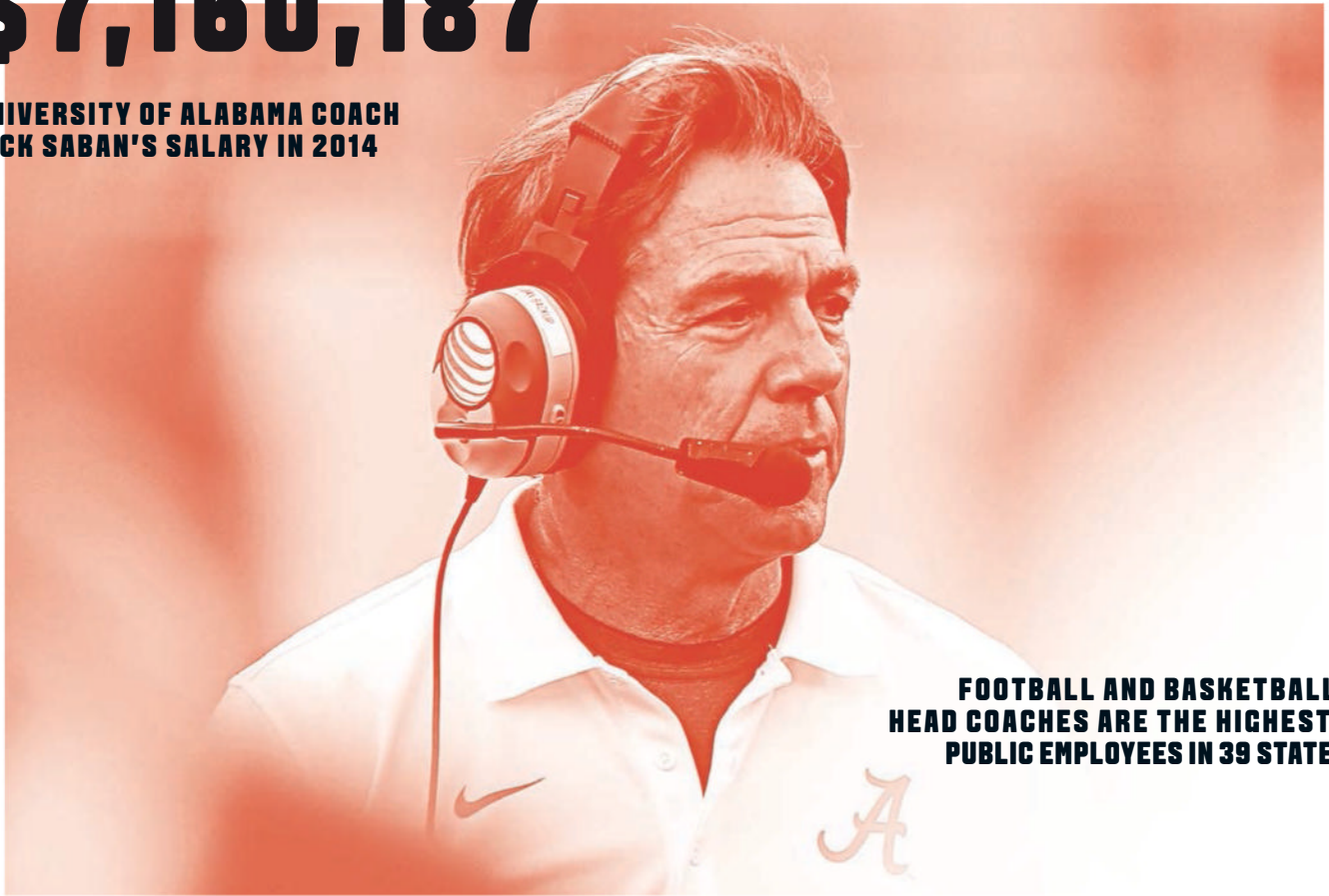
## The largest myth surrounding college sports may be its inevitability.

sustainable." Six months later, UAB decided to resurrect the football program, possibly as soon as the 2017 season. In an interview in June, Watts said the school's students, alumni, and the city of Birmingham itself had "stepped up," with \$17.2 million to cover the team's operational deficit. The overall dynamic for the smaller schools remains ominous: An open market system would sustain premium teams that have the ability to compete for premium players on the basis of how much they could pay them. The rest could be forced out of existence altogether.

One unavoidable by-product of the reduction in programs would be a corresponding drop-off in the number of athletic scholarships. "If you introduce an open market, or a quasi-open market," Zimbalist said, "the coaches would no longer have 85 scholarships." He estimated that the number might shrink to 45, or about the same as an NFL roster. "If you have to pay, then you become more frugal." Consider the ramifications: This new, purportedly more just system would provide for the professional-quality players at the expense of the larger pool of merely elite ones. Remember that the people swept away by this capitalist tide would largely be young men from low-income backgrounds, many of whom

# \$7,160,187

**UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA COACH  
NICK SABAN'S SALARY IN 2014**



**FOOTBALL AND BASKETBALL  
HEAD COACHES ARE THE HIGHEST-PAID  
PUBLIC EMPLOYEES IN 39 STATES**

would not qualify to attend their schools on academic merit. It is an odd remedy for exploitation that takes away access to education for significant numbers of the exploited.

**The intricacies of** pay systems, of who would be paid what and why, merit further deliberation. The byzantine work-arounds needed to square everything with Title IX, the admirable law that requires similar provisions for male and female athletes, would have to be reckoned with. As would full and fair compensation for revenue indirectly tied to on-field performance, as with the O'Bannon case. The ruling for the plaintiffs recommended that at least \$5,000 per player, per year of eligibility, be set aside to compensate the players for their use as video-game avatars. The money would be kept in a trust until each player completed his eligibility. Not exactly big money, but it really should be if we're striving for equity of treatment.

One avenue through which to construct a workable pay system would be via the union constructs found at the professional level: minimum salaries, collective bargaining, salary caps, drafts, and so forth. In April 2014, a regional director for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which

oversees unionization efforts for the federal government, allowed the football players at Northwestern University to hold a union vote. More than a year later, the NLRB's national body unanimously declined to grant the players the right to unionize, determining, at least for now, that the players are students, not employees. (The NLRB noted that Northwestern was a single school engaged in such an effort and left room to change its ruling if a broader movement toward unionization arose.) "The problem from the athlete's standpoint is their legal definition as amateur athletes and not employees," Towson University's Howard Nixon said. "You open that door, and then you get the possibility of all different forms of compensation. That scares the NCAA. They won't even use the word 'compensation.'"

Employees unionize; students do not. This returns us to the idea of what restrictions can be placed on the autonomy that working people possess over their earnings. One can reasonably argue for encumbrances on the activities of student athletes. They are trainees, essentially, in need of guidance. The same can hardly be said for university employees. In a professional collegiate football system, it would be hard to justify forcing the laborers to buy an education. Minimum academic standards for admission

would no longer make sense, either: These workers aren't being hired for how they did in high school algebra. Time permitting, many players would avail themselves of the opportunity to go to school; that's about as far as the logic can stretch.

One happy consequence of a pay system: The coaches would in all likelihood make less money. "When I was a kid, I went to the bank to set up an account, and they gave me a free toaster," said Andy Schwarz, an economist and antitrust expert who has testified to Congress in favor of paying college football and basketball players. "They competed on perks, and the toaster was the shiny lure." Coaches are among the most important "shiny lures" in today's college sports, he said, and they are compensated in line with their luster. Nick Saban, football's highest-paid head coach, earned \$7,160,187 in 2014; Mike Krzyzewski, the Duke men's basketball coach, took home \$9,682,032. In many cases, the coaches are their state's highest-paid public employees. Rudimentary economics suggest that in a pay system this should change: The supply-and-demand response would shift away from the coaches and toward the players. "The moment the banks could compete on interest rates, they stopped offering toasters," Schwarz added. "It's not that coaches won't matter. But they'll be worth less." This would be a worthy outcome, but an ethically weak prescription for addressing the NCAA's cartel behavior.

The largest potential impact of a market system, one hopes, would be the demise of the NCAA as a governing body of a Fortune 500-like corporation. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, in a landmark 1984 decision that broke the NCAA's monopoly on sports broadcasts and paved the way for today's billion-dollar conference-television contracts, remarked that "The NCAA plays a critical role in the maintenance of a revered tradition of amateurism in college sports." If the players join the cartel, however, that revered tradition ceases to exist, and the body that primarily serves to separate the athletes from their money becomes redundant. That's what agents are for.

Ultimately, none of these permutations are prohibitive. Other proposals could be weighed, wrinkle upon wrinkle, variants both elementary (pay players based on minutes played) and ornate (spin the largest programs off as private, university-branded corporations). A pay system could be created. There are a lot of smart people in this country. I have confidence that someone could devise a method for spreading around football and basketball money in a form agreeable, if not to all, then at least to most. It could be unionized, if that's what the players wanted, with all the good and frustrating things that issue from that. (Rose Bowl strike!) The new system could be lucrative or modest, as the interested parties see fit. The obstacles could be overcome, the details worked out, the rough edges negotiated smooth. But the question of whether we *should* remains unanswered.

Sports at the college level, particularly the money sports, are about much more than the games: They represent a form of social leveling and an avenue for social justice. Football and basketball afford access to higher education to groups of

gifted young men who might not receive it otherwise. But if the goal is to make social redress—and ours is a society most definitely in need of correction—why do we believe that its best expression is via the athletes? When the players I knew at USC argued in favor of compensation, I would often think of their high school girlfriends, or the valedictorian at their schools, the kids who wanted to be actors or engineers, any of the meritorious others who do not get free rides to college.

Given what we know about college sports, and college athletes, couldn't it be argued that other people are, in fact, more deserving of a subsidized education? If we want to make our society and our schools better, then perhaps we should do just that. The effort and attention devoted to finding the best student athletes in low-income communities could be put instead to finding the best students in those same places. Paying the players would move the money around, place more of it in deserving pockets, slice up the pie in ways that would more fairly satisfy all appetites. But everyone keeps eating.

**The largest myth** surrounding college sports may be its inevitability. Revenue-generating college athletics make a lot of money. It can be argued that they exist, for the most part, not so much for sport but as machines calibrated to generate revenue. The efficiency of the machinery, the fact that it works well, and that we delight in its output, serves for many people as a philosophical reason to keep the line moving. Money, once made, cannot be unmade, after all; college sports are lucrative and therefore immutable. This right-wing, job-creation tautology strikes me as the best argument of all for disassembling the NCAA's too-big-to-fail structures. Instead we use it as an opportunity to push seat licenses onto a sports-mad public.

It's possible, however, to imagine a humbler, genuinely amateur version of college sports. Not the fictional, faux-amateur one found in today's NCAA—I carry no water for the status quo. The current system is abhorrent, and in advocating against the payment of players, I am not suggesting that the NCAA, the schools, or the coaches continue to keep the money generated under an ethically bankrupt structure. But I also believe in the educational missions that our schools and athletics programs never seem to operate within.

I would like to find a way to bring a genuine student athlete onto our campuses. Yet to do that, the primary obstacle to his and her existence—the enormity of the money—must be addressed. No more TV contracts and cable deals, endorsement revenue and ticket income, video games and sweat suits. In this scenario, swank athletic facilities like Heritage Hall would fade into irrelevance, but be left standing, their sagging hulks a blight on the landscape of our campuses, like the Soviet-constructed, Brutalist monoliths dotting the fallow exurbs of second-rate Russian cities.

So be it. Money is a blight on college sports. We must remove it from the equation and leave the good things: sports and schools. 🍌

WATCH YOUR  
STEP



# the trigger warning myth

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How college students became pawns in the culture wars.

BY AARON R. HANLON

I'M AN ENGLISH professor, and I sometimes use trigger warnings. I realize this admission makes me a target of ridicule from some quarters—primarily, though not exclusively, conservatives. And that's precisely the problem: The trigger-warning debate that has flared over the past few years, and which shows no signs of abating, is being driven largely by politically motivated writers outside of the academy. Trigger warnings themselves aren't even truly what's at issue in the debate; rather, they're symbolic of what many see as universities' growing deference to political correctness and to students' emotional sensitivities. That is, "trigger warning" has become shorthand for everything that's supposedly wrong with higher education in America.

This rhetorical trope reached its nadir with a recent cover story in *The Atlantic*, "The Coddling of the American Mind," in which Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt insinuate that trigger warnings and "vindictive protectiveness" are behind the college mental health crisis. "A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense," they write, adding that a "campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. The new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically." Which is just an academic way of saying that politically correct students are driving themselves crazy.

I don't doubt that emotional coddling can play a negative role in the mental health of college students, and so it's worth investigating. But I also think Lukianoff, the head of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and Haidt, a social psychologist at the NYU Stern School of Business, are granting certain practices outsize and, in some cases, misleading roles in the mental health crisis. How have trigger warnings, of all things, been elevated to explanatory value akin to academic and professional pressures, increased accessibility to college, familial and broader economic pressures, reduced sleep, sexual assault epidemics, image-policing on social media, and any number of other factors that experts have identified as serious contributors to the mental health crisis on college campuses?

I write this as a professor well outside of Haidt's field, from a pedagogical standpoint. I am not trained in social psychology, but I serve one of many different kinds of caregiving roles for my students—a job concerned primarily with intellectual development, as opposed to their general mental health in a clinical context. That is, I am not qualified to explain what's causing the mental health crisis on campus, but I know quite well how trigger warnings are—and aren't—employed in class. Our national debate about trigger warnings and political correctness, waged in magazines and on social media, evinces a troubling lack of awareness about what it actually looks like in real life to express sensitivities to college students about their apparently increasing anxieties and traumas. So much

ink has been spilled over triggers warnings, and somehow we're still getting them wrong.

**I never imagined** becoming a defender of trigger warnings. This is the first time I've written (or spoken) the word *microaggressions* in recent memory. I have been and continue to be a proponent of the idea that the best way to handle wrongheadedness and hate speech is to address these with corrective speech—to present ideas, rationales, and evidence that overwhelm ignorance and bigotry with a blistering light. Accordingly, when vulgar or emotionally challenging material is part of the subject matter I'm responsible for teaching, or serves an otherwise specific pedagogical purpose, I'm not shy about it.

Here's a brief, but by no means exhaustive, list of things I've carefully selected for college syllabi and deliberately taught in my courses: a pair of poems about impotence and premature ejaculation; a satire about slaughtering human infants and feeding them to the poor; a poem that uses the C-word twice in a mere 33 lines and describes King Charles II in coitus with his mistress with the phrase "his dull, graceless bollocks hang an arse"; a novel in which a wealthy man gets his maid to marry him by kidnapping her and continually cornering her with unwanted sexual advances; a graphic history of the torture methods and other cruelties inflicted on African slaves leading up to the Haitian Revolution; a poem written in the voice of a male domestic servant and attempted rapist contacting his victim from prison.

The items on this list, and many others on my syllabi, could be censored by "social justice warriors" from the left, since many of them could be triggering for students suffering from post-traumatic stress. In another context, however, they could be censored from the right, by people who tell the sexual-assault survivor balking at a literary rape scene to "grow up" but oppose the teaching of sexually explicit material because it's "trash." In both cases, censoring this material is a bad idea, and providing context to students is the best avenue for explaining why.

If you read the list above and wonder how or why any serious person would teach such material at a prestigious (and expensive) college, consider the authors behind the list. It includes works by major, canonical authors from antiquity to the eighteenth century, such as Ovid, Aphra Behn, Jonathan Swift, John Wilmot, Samuel Richardson, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. It also includes the historian C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, one of the definitive histories of the Haitian Revolution. Simply put, leaving this stuff off the syllabus because it might be triggering is not an option.

Rather than being the end of a difficult conversation, trigger warnings are actually the beginning of one: I use them in the classroom as a way of preparing students who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, while also easing the entire class into a discussion of the material. The thinking behind the idea that trigger warnings are a form of censorship is fundamentally illogical. Those who offer

warnings, at our professional discretion, about potentially triggering material are doing so precisely because we're about to teach it! If we used trigger warnings to say, effectively, "Don't read this, it's scary," then there'd be no need to warn in the first place; we'd just leave the material off the syllabus.

It's true that giving a warning runs the risk of students avoiding or disengaging with the material out of fear of being triggered (in my three years of teaching, students have come to office hours to discuss sensitive material, but to my knowledge not one has left class or failed to turn in an assignment because of a trigger warning). If a student disengages, however, a professor still can (and should) follow up in a couple of ways. One is to have a private conversation with the student about the material, away from the pressures of the classroom; another is to take the student's response as an occasion to check in with the student and make sure they have access to campus mental health resources. Few of the media voices catastrophizing trigger warnings seem to understand that professors' interactions with students in the classroom and during office hours are some of the most important ways we have to learn about our student's mental health (or time management, or substance abuse) problems. While the purpose of trigger warnings is not to screen for mental health problems, being attuned to how students are reacting to material and prompting them to react to the hard stuff can help us catch problems before they become real catastrophes.

For those of you who are imagining scores of students using professors' trigger warnings disingenuously, as a way to get out of class or a reading assignment, this isn't (for most of us) our first rodeo. Students use deception all the time, but an office-hours summons is usually all we need to determine whether the student might need help from a mental health professional or was just trying to game the system. In most cases, however, after telling students that something might be emotionally challenging or explicit, most of them do exactly what most people do when warned to watch out for something lurid: They become even more curious.

**In their Atlantic** article, Lukianoff and Haidt define trigger warnings as "alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response." Note the syntax of this sentence, which presents trigger warnings not as something professors choose to do in environments that we control, but as something externally imposed upon us ("are expected to issue"). This way of describing trigger warnings is an example of a tactic we see used widely to critique trigger warnings while portraying college students as a bunch of paradoxically terrifying wimps.

Lukianoff and Haidt provide a series of such examples, from a viral Vox essay ("I'm a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me") to Jerry Seinfeld's complaints that young people are so threateningly soft that he won't do stand-up on college campuses. The implication here is that students are at once too thin-skinned to withstand discussions of Ovid or rape law or gay jokes, and powerful to the extent that their demands

for trigger warnings must be heeded by professors, university administrations, and visiting comedians. Between these two extremes—of teachers buckling under students’ demands and of teachers coddling oversensitive students—lies the reality of teaching. While a minuscule number of colleges and universities have gone so far as to codify trigger warnings for professors, most trigger warnings exist as a pedagogical choice that professors make in situations over which we exercise considerable control. (And they have existed as such for much longer than the present debate suggests: While the phrase *trigger warning* was not part of my vocabulary as an undergraduate, words of caution were common: “We’re going to spend some time today on lynching images, so prepare yourselves for graphic and difficult material.”)

Professors give warnings of all sorts that, when not explicitly entangled in the national politics of political correctness, amount less to coddling than to minimizing chances of disengagement with material. Advising students to allow extra time for a particularly long reading assignment, for instance, is a reasonable way of reducing the number of students who show up unprepared. Likewise, cautioning students that a class discussion will feature a poem about rape—and encouraging students to come to office hours if they’re uncomfortable expressing their views in front of their peers—is a similarly reasonable way of relieving the immediate pressure to perform in class.

Those of us who occasionally use trigger warnings are not as naïve as we’re made out to be; we understand that there is no magical warning that will assuage all anxieties and protect students from all traumas, nor is there a boilerplate trigger warning or trigger-warning policy that professors can be reasonably expected to follow formulaically. Rather, trigger warnings are, in practice, just one of a set of tools that professors use with varying degrees of formality to negotiate the give-and-take of classroom interactions. Take away the media hysteria surrounding trigger warnings, and all that’s left is a mode of conversational priming that we all use: “You might want to sit down for this,” or “I’m not sure how to say this, but...” It’s hardly anti-intellectual or emotionally damaging to anticipate that other people may react to traumatic material with negative emotions, particularly if they suffer from PTSD; it’s human to engage others with empathy. It’s also human to have emotional responses to life and literature—responses that may come before, but in no way preclude, a dispassionate analysis of essential literature.

**I’m not blind** to the problems with trigger warnings and hyperbolic political correctness. The examples that many critics cite are alarming: Harvard law students asked professors not to use the word *violate*; Brandeis students felt that an installation exposing racial stereotypes of Asian Americans was itself a “microaggression”; Northwestern professor Laura Kipnis was accused of Title IX violations for an article she wrote on student-teacher relationships for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. But I’m not convinced

that we can lay these problems—and by extension, adverse developments in the mental health of college students—at the feet of trigger warnings.

The backlash against trigger warnings is part of a broader backlash against political correctness, which tells us something important about where the public thinks the power lies. People on the margins may get press for tweeting things like “kill all white men”—as a “diversity officer” at Goldsmiths, University of London did—and the occasional professor may be undeservedly shamed or ousted for running afoul of students’ expectations of P.C. language. In both scenarios, however, the heart of the matter is who holds the authority to choose the best (or worst) course of action. The P.C. backlash and the trigger-warning backlash hold a common fallacy: They see pushback from the margins and mistake it for threats to the most institutionally powerful.

“Kill all white people” is a despicable sentiment, but in practice it’s not white people who face the gravest threats of being gunned down by those who wield the authority to do so. Similarly, students can demand trigger warnings or sensitivity trainings, but students remain more vulnerable to institutional power than the professors who assign their grades or the administrators who adjudicate their missteps. And if there exist situations in which professors really are “terrified” by our students, and students are actually lapsing into mental distress because we’re too afraid to cross them, then the problem is much bigger than trigger warnings. The problem is mistrusting the experience and authority of professors in our roles as teachers and intellectual caregivers. If we can lose our jobs either for teaching traumatic material or for failing to warn students adequately about it, what’s really happening here isn’t that we’re ruining students by coddling them; we’re losing the authority we rely on to be sensitive to students’ anxieties without giving into them, to use techniques like trigger warnings judiciously rather than being forced to use them in some generalized and codified way.

The trigger-warning problem isn’t actually a trigger-warning problem; it’s what happens when the messy business of teaching and learning, and the complex challenges to students’ mental well-being, become flash points in the culture wars. The effect of this entanglement is an exaggerated impression of trigger warnings that draws on the most extreme examples, a tactic that mirrors and plays into the very currents of partisan politics that Lukianoff and Haidt lament as a threat to American democracy. Of course, the authors consider trigger warnings to be “bad for American democracy,” too, and call on universities to “officially and strongly discourage” them. Instead of seeking new sources of outrage around trigger warnings, though, we should understand more thoroughly why this particular pedagogical choice, one of so many, has become a national wedge issue. That trigger warnings are rare, and may be of occasional benefit to professors like me who employ them, is too inconvenient a reality for those who are busy waging war on political correctness. 🌀

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# Drunk Confessions

Women and the clichés of the literary drunkard.

BY MICHELLE DEAN

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**WHAT MIGHT BE** called “the artistic temperament” is a subject about which many people have grandiose, romantic notions. All those biopics with people staring hard out windows at beautiful scenes, pen in hand, bearing the fruits of louche genius while maintaining excellent dental hygiene. Whoever the culprit, we clearly like our geniuses to be “consumed” by their craft, and we like them tortured—and if possible, drunk. The idea, broadly put, is that the liquor frees up creative energy. Or else, that an artist drinks to soothe the ravages of creativity on his psyche.

Artists have rarely wanted to correct the public on this point. This was especially true of writers in the middle of the twentieth century, laboring in the long interval between Prohibition—when writing, celebrity and drink got tangled up at the Algonquin Round Table and in the lives of modernists—and the 1970s. (Hard drugs slipped in after that but began to signify a certain cynicism rather than angst in the writer.) The trite liquor-soaked romance of their craft suited these writers, it seemed; it gave them a handy excuse. However many degenerate nights were lost at a bar, however many times a person might be rushed to a hospital with a suicide attempt, it was worth it. The blackouts and bad marriages and every sordid bit of it could be explained away by art with a capital A. Who wouldn’t trade a few years of misery to write something like *Gatsby*? Or *A Farewell to Arms*? Or “The Swimmer”? Or “Fern Hill”? Put that way, the math of art and drink comes out looking attractive, glamorous, in spite of the death and in spite of the suffering.

But, as ever, the benefits of the myth were doled out unevenly, because there was always a different kind of weight

attached to a woman drinker. “When a woman drinks it’s as if an animal were drinking, or a child,” Marguerite Duras once wrote. “Alcoholism is scandalous in a woman, and a female alcoholic is rare, a serious matter. It’s a slur on the divine in our nature.”

We are mostly beyond the point, in this world of ours, of calling women “divine,” and we are also past the point where a woman alcoholic is truly rare, in the open, public way Duras meant. Women now talk often about drinking and being drunk. Their memoirs on the subject are best-sellers. But the genre of personal testimony turns the role of drinking in writing on its head. Instead of being the engine, it is the subject.

**A KEY METAPHOR** for alcoholism is that of unquenchable thirst. It sounds simpleminded, I know, but you have to start there to get anywhere at all close to the psychological nihilism of it. When you pour the spirits down your throat, you are pouring them into a void. For a drunk, the emotional equivalent of stomach lining simply isn’t there. The need to drink just goes on and on.

The contours of the void aren’t always obvious, not even after its existence has been seen and reckoned with. That is probably why, in pretty much every alcoholic’s memoir I’ve ever read, the need to drink is described in simple language, even cliché. For Sarah Hepola, in her new, best-selling *Blackout: Remembering the Things I Drank to Forget*, it’s “a God-shaped hole, a yearning, a hunger to be complete.” For Mary Karr, in *Lit*, a book governed by a poet’s love of wordplay, it’s simply a “black hole.” For

ILLUSTRATION BY MARTINE JOHANNA



Dorothy Parker and Marguerite Duras

Caroline Knapp, writing *Drinking: A Love Story* before either of them, it's a "pit of loneliness and terror and rage."

The paradox of the alcoholic's memoir is that the feelings are not less powerful for being described in such a pedestrian way. If you are the right kind of reader for them—which is not to say a fellow alcoholic, as I am not—these books go down easy. It may be in part a voyeur's thirst for stories of abjection that makes them such compulsive reading—that's another cliché, a critical one—but good writers can take your curiosity and mold it into an empathetic movement. Empathy needs a supporting note, because it's a self-help word, and we live in a culture that both guzzles and disdains self-help mantras: The understanding of self and others is obviously the only escape from addiction. If the point is to get out of your own head, then understanding yourself as part of a community is what will pull you out.

A lesser sort of empathy can, of course, be cheaply bought—sentimentally, in the Wildean sense. You can get caught in the trance of your own sad story. But Knapp's, Karr's, and Hepola's books are not self-pitying in this way. Each tracks a process of becoming whole (or at least, more whole). And all three are good writers in different ways, and they are somewhat different drunks, too, as it happens. Knapp has the psychoanalyst's daughter's knack for self-diagnosis, constantly tracing her own repressions back to her father's; Karr cracks jokes in the middle of every miserable anecdote; Hepola has a deeply generous persona. They all get up in front of you with the self-critical attitude of the person at a recovery meeting, eager to describe their past and present selves but frustrated by how they got to this place.

*Blackout*, the most conventional of the three books, offers the clearest illustration of the appeal of the genre. Here we have the straightforward story of a young, talented, middle-class

**"When a woman drinks it's as if an animal were drinking, or a child," Marguerite Duras once wrote.**

woman, who nonetheless keenly felt a gap in her soul. At seven, she stole her first beer. All along, one knows what's coming: Hepola's book opens as she snaps awake in a strange bed. Hepola deftly manages to preserve the ambiguities of the incident—she doesn't remember the seduction, if there was one—without

forgiving it all. "I closed the door," of the hotel room, she writes, "and the click of the lock's tongue in the groove brought me such relief. The sound of a narrow escape."

There are other horrors, and voyeurs, if so inclined, can drink this book (a metaphor that kept occurring to me as I read) in an evening. But that elegant presentation of the bad incident gives you a hint that Hepola smooths out the events she describes. As a narrator she is always measured and careful. There is a level on which her maturity begins to actually work against her recovery story in a way she can hardly have intended. I began to think to myself: If it will make me seem this grounded and wise and judicious with my imagery and metaphors as she, maybe a few years of getting lost in a void would be worth it.

Of course, I then dismissed that thought. Mostly.

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aturity comes from self-possession, and self-possession can be a powerful thing for both a drinker and for a woman. It is power, somehow, that makes us see men and women drinkers differently. The "line for decades," Hepola acknowledges in her book, has been that women hide their drinking, that they are unduly punished for it. Hepola says this wasn't true, not for her. She "looked up to women who drink." And gatherings of women, she said, were pools of wine. "Rivers of wine. Waterfalls of wine. Wine and confession. Wine and sisterhood." In an age when female intoxication is everywhere, drinking is often presented as part of a kind of feminine self-determination.

She has a point as to popular culture. Her own book is a best-seller (as Knapp's and many others have been, too), and we needn't limit ourselves to gauging attitudes that way. Tune in to ABC on Thursdays and you'll find ur-career woman of the moment Olivia Pope drowning her sorrows in a giant goblet of red, usually Shiraz. The poster for Amy Schumer's *Trainwreck*, depicting her drinking from a bottle in a paper bag, did not so much as sway in a breeze of commentary. Even Hillary Clinton is happy to be photographed drinking white wine these days. So publicly feminized has the activity of drinking become that *The Guardian* recently published a defensive article about what it called—and I am not kidding—"brosé."



Chicagoans celebrate the repeal of Prohibition on December 8, 1933.

The implication of all this is that drinking is a way of being an empowered woman. That's what bothers Hepola. It bothered Knapp, too. Knapp writes uneasily of the way martinis aided her flirtation, letting her "tap in to a feeling of power I was otherwise too self-conscious and fearful to acknowledge." The feeling, she insists again and again, is real. She wrote about the "drink of deception: alcohol gives you power and robs you of it in equal measure." The best illustration of this comes in a certain regrettable kind of drunken one-night stand, where an initial bit of bravery at the bar can disappear in the light of morning.

The place where drink makes women less powerful, however, is in the same place that women always get attacked for adopting vice: the realm of high prestige. When Olivia Laing set out to study and explore alcoholism and the great writer in last

year's *The Trip to Echo Spring*, she ignored women. Faced with such a wealth of famous sots to choose from, Laing canvassed only six: John Cheever, Tennessee Williams, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Berryman, and Raymond Carver. She explains away her choice of only men with a wave-of-the-hand parenthetical: "(There were many women writers I could have chosen too, but for reasons that will become apparent their stories came too close to home.)" Which is fair enough; *The Trip to Echo Spring* does delve into Laing's own family history, and she is deeply critical of the self-aggrandizement and self-destructiveness of these men.

As though in apology, Laing later published a breezy overview of women writers who struggled with drink for *The Guardian*. Still, the difference between the deep reading Laing's

book affords those male writers and the much quicker treatment of the women—crammed into a brief article—couldn't be a clearer example of the double standard, one Laing never directly engages. Male writers get careful interpretation of the role of alcohol in their creative lives; women writers are alcoholics, pure and simple.



If you are under the impression that that's too harsh an indictment of literary history, here is a pretty stark anecdote for you: Both drunks, both writers who were actually famous in their own day, Ernest Hemingway and Dorothy Parker were friends, or so she thought. There was one night, though, in 1926, when Hemingway was at a party at Archibald MacLeish's; Parker wasn't there but friends were. At some point in the evening, Hemingway decided to recite a poem he'd recently written. It was called "To a Tragic Poetess," and its 82 lines took shots at Parker's "plump ass," her suicide attempts, and her abortion:

To celebrate in borrowed cadence  
your former gnaw and itch for Charley  
who went away and left you not so flat behind him  
And it performed so late those little hands  
those well formed little hands  
And were there little feet and had  
the testicles descended?

The poem then goes on to contrast her situation to that of men Hemingway considers braver and more honorable in their suffering than Parker. "Thus tragic poetesses are made," it ends, "by observation."

How uncomfortable. Parker's biographers have never been totally sure if she knew of the poem's existence, though it made the New York gossip rounds. Hemingway's biographers, if they bring it up at all, tend to skate nervously by. In both cases, people seem to think that Hemingway was being mean, but not... wrong. Here, for example, is how the introduction to Hemingway's *Complete Poems* sums it up: "The poem is an attack on a

writer who failed, in Hemingway's estimation, to see, to feel. It is an attack on sham self-destructiveness, especially when it is coupled with a lack of sympathy for others."

Hemingway may not have been slamming these women's alcoholism directly, but those feelings of self-destructiveness are the diggers of our old friend the black pit. This idea of Hemingway's—and let's not pretend that it's just his—is that there is a bright line between real self-destructiveness and the borrowed or observed kind, and that in the aggregate it favors men. So there are real black pits, and there are borrowed ones, and only the former are the proper subject of art.

Academics who have looked at this episode, like Rhonda Pettit, point out that a lot of the early modern men had trouble with what they called women's "sentimentality." But looking back at the course of a century of writing, it's now the men who seem mired in sentimentality, constructed in part by self-hatred and in part by the sort of demand, like "honor," that in our own time has become more double-edged sword than flaming, self-evident righteousness.

Women writers, meanwhile, have evolved a more complicated relationship with drunkenness. It is no longer quite the stain it once was. Yes, Elizabeth Bishop hid her fondness for gin—and literally any very revealing aspect of her personality—in exchange for respectability. I can also think of one famous and beloved woman writer in America whose reputation for drunkenness is much-talked about behind closed doors without being openly stated.

Parker herself, though she went through a period of being stereotyped as a ruinous drunk, is now mostly remembered as a sophisticate. Certain feminist rereadings of her work helped here; if there's a writer more self-aware of her own penchant for self-destructive behavior than Dorothy Parker, I don't know who it is. Patricia Highsmith's sales have never suffered either. In the literary merit stakes, things have also changed: Though Anne Sexton drew severe criticism for being an alcoholic in the 1960s, her confessional poetry still has a popular currency that Robert Lowell's—her contemporary and teacher—never reached.

Still the canon is for the most part seriously dented by the effects of what you could call the Hemingway attitude—this idea that a woman is contaminated by self-destructiveness, and contaminated in a way that slurs her art. Trying to calculate or predict literary reputation is about as reliable a science as predicting when it will rain next month, but contemporary attitudes do tend to stick to writers of the mid-century in particular, and women have suffered for this. You can see it in the way we don't count, alongside Fitzgerald and Cheever, writers like Jean Stafford, Maeve Brennan, and Shirley Jackson. Where those women are covered—when their books are reprinted by the NYRB Classics series, or when a biography like Ruth Franklin's forthcoming book on Jackson makes it through the pipeline—it is always in a posture of rescue. Reputational politics favor a certain kind of mid-century man, one who wrote fiction, and this in spite of the way all his same pathologies, his self-destructiveness, and self-delusions, operate in his texts, too.

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he process of recovery is connected in a very deep way with storytelling. At an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, it is an openness about the contours of one's life, telling a story to the crowd, that is the first step towards a kind of healing. Knapp's, Karr's, and Hepola's memoirs are governed by that same ethos. The dismissive word for this would be *confessional*, and that is a word that has been used to denigrate women's writing. But here we have three books that are not unfiltered documents of abjection; they are instead ambivalent and self-aware about the interaction between alcohol and life.

After all, at some point one realizes that these memoirs are haunted by clichés because it is clichés that their writers know will end up saving them. The halls of recovery, owned mostly by A.A. as they are, are papered over with well-worn sayings: "My name is, and I'm an alcoholic." Rock bottom. "Let go and let God." Amends. "Higher power."

Higher powers, as it happens, are the A.A. cliché par excellence. No aspect of the recovery process draws more obsessive criticism in all the writing about A.A. than its connection to, er, you know, God. Yet Karr's memoir, in fact, is less about confessing all her drunken sins than about describing the process by which she came around to recognizing her "higher power." It is about the process by which admitting powerlessness saved her. "Before, I'd feared surrender would sand me down to nothing. Now I've started believing it can bloom me more solidly into myself."

How to process observations like these, which are in every drinking memoir and tread some thin line between honesty and sentimentality? What to do with the implications they have for women in particular, which is that drinking will indeed delude us about the levels of our own power? I don't know the answer.

**BUT MAYBE NOT** knowing the answer is the whole point. Towards the middle of *Lit*, Karr affords us a sidelong glance at another writer struggling with the dictates of recovery:

On the way out, I pass bandana'ed David talking with great speed and animation to the musician. David's actually holding up his finger in some Confucian posture, saying, It's a logical fallacy that they're telling me I have a disease whose defining symptom is believing you don't have a disease, since this a priori implies that any citizen who denies they have this ailment is no doubt infected...

Like me, he's obviously here to educate them to their cult's fallacious thinking.

David here is David Foster Wallace, a man who now occupies a greater place in the minds of contemporary fiction writers than Hemingway. In his best moments he abandoned that Confucian posture for a stance more ambivalent about what he knew and what he didn't. Recovery changed him, and once we all learned of it you could find it everywhere in his work.

More than ten years after the episode Karr records, Wallace delivered a speech at Kenyon College in which he repeated a story he'd learned in recovery, one about two fish swimming along who ask about the nature of water. He said in this

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**In an age when female intoxication is everywhere, drinking is often presented as part of a kind of feminine self-determination.**

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speech, "the fact is that, in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have life-or-death importance." Then, characteristically, he backtracked. "That may sound like hyperbole, or abstract nonsense." He still went on to say it's true.

It's fallen out of fashion, in high-flown literary circles, to like this speech, to think of it as representative of the "real Wallace." The recoil is motivated in part by the idea that the public, which seized on his words in a viral frenzy, has sentimentalized Wallace. And it's true, because look around, and you'll find a line of that speech—"Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship"—quoted for every purpose under the sun.

Hepola quotes it too. "I worshipped David Foster Wallace once," she writes. "In some ways, I still do. His suicide is another reminder that all the knowledge and talent in the world will not stop your hands from tying the noose that will hang you." This, by the way, is as grandiose and romantic as the artistic temperament gets. And yet, like most old saws, and especially like the ones that will actually save you, it does have an element of truth. ☞



# Delete Yourself

Television's conflicted, heroic hackers.

BY ESTHER BREGER

IF THERE'S ONE thing hackers hate, it's reductive Hollywood portrayals of their profession. The characters in *Mr. Robot*, an anxiety-inducing techno-thriller which aired on USA Network this summer, are no different. In the show's fourth episode, two middle-aged cybercriminals watch the 1995 film *Hackers* on a motel-room television. As numbers dance across the screen and Lorraine Bracco frets about virtual rabbits, one of them scoffs at the "Hollywood hacker bullshit," the unrealistic technology, and rapid typing. "I bet you right now some writer's working hard on a TV show that'll mess up this generation's idea of hacker culture," he says.

As its first season comes to a close, it seems unlikely that *Mr. Robot* will be that show. Sam Esmail, the creator, is as obsessed with technical accuracy as Matthew Weiner was with period detail. It's been eagerly praised by both cybersecurity professionals and hackers for abandoning techno-babble. "*Mr. Robot* is the most accurate portrayal of security and hacking culture ever to grace the screen," one member of Anonymous told a reporter. Among the flood of television shows made in the last few years to capitalize on our collective anxiety about privacy and data breaches, *Mr. Robot* is the first to receive the widespread approval of its subject.

ILLUSTRATION BY EERO LAMPINEN

In the show's opening scenes, we meet protagonist Elliot, played by Rami Malek, in a coffee-shop booth, sitting across from a mass distributor of child pornography. Calmly and without affect, Elliot explains how he hacked into the guy's network, found kiddie porn, and sent an anonymous tip to the cops. He's not in it for blackmail, for money, or for any kind of glory. This is the hacker as white knight, an anonymous do-gooder who can spot hidden evil and do something about it. "In three short minutes I destroyed a man's business, life, existence," Elliot's voice-over tells us. "I deleted him."

Watching this unfold, the viewer is set up for a certain kind of show—the socially awkward hero using his uncommon skills to fight crime, slowly eliminating his city of perverts, creeps, and bad guys. Maybe he will get a lovable partner: *Sherlock*, with a cyber twist? That kind of show would seem only slightly out of place on USA, a network best known for its procedural dramas with attractive stars fixing problems in sunny locales (see: *Burn Notice*, *White Collar*, *Covert Affairs*). But Esmail, an Egyptian-American director who first conceived of *Mr. Robot* as a film, is interested in something else. After realizing his script was far too long for the movies, Esmail stretched his narrative into a TV series that, even in this post-*True Detective* era, is startlingly strange and ambitious—it's as twisty as the early days of *Lost* and as visually inventive as *Breaking Bad*.

Elliot is both more discomfiting and more sympathetic than the many anti-social, endearingly geeky figures of recent TV. Malek, a hypnotic actor, recognizable from minor roles in *The Master* and *Short Term 12*, plays him with a boyish intensity: He's opaque, withdrawn, vulnerable. Yet, he's uncommonly good at reading people, which is his greatest skill as a hacker. Elliot doesn't only hack bad guys. In his spare time he hacks everyone he knows: his childhood friend, his psychiatrist, and their boyfriends. He invades their privacy as zealously as he protects his own. For him it's a compulsion, a way to escape from the lonely void and to connect without having to communicate. Elliot undertakes these small incursions into others' private information because they give him the feeling of a modicum of control. He may not be able to destroy the free market and save the world, but at least he can protect the women around him, be their invisible hero.

By day, Elliot works at a cybersecurity firm subcontracted to a massive corporation named E Corp—or, as Elliot chooses to hear it, Evil Corp. The show isn't subtle in its anti-corporate politics, especially in the early episodes. When Elliot's psychiatrist, Krista (*ER*'s Gloria Reuben), asks him why he is disappointed in society, his response—"Fuck society"—is shocking only because it's accompanied by the real logos of Apple, Facebook, Twitter:

Is it that we collectively thought Steve Jobs was a great man even when we knew he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it's that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit, the world itself is just one big hoax. Spamming each other with our running commentary bullshit, masquerading as insight. Our social media

faking as intimacy. Or is it that we voted for this?  
Not with our rigged elections but with our things, our  
property, our money.

Then a mysterious character known only as Mr. Robot (Christian Slater) recruits him into fsociety, an underground hacking cell with Occupy Wall Street affectations that wants to erase the world's debt; their plan is to destroy the data center of E Corp, which controls 70 percent of the consumer-credit industry (an unrealistic detail, but no matter). They meet in an abandoned Coney Island arcade to plot the destruction of capitalism, starting with mega-conglomerate E Corp. (In a nice touch, fictional E Corp shares a logo with real-life Enron.) They release videos in which they wear distorted Monopoly Man masks and threaten to leak documents.

The members of fsociety are angry at America's oligarchy, and, somehow, idealistic about the possibility of changing it. They claim they want economic revolution, but Trenton, a quiet college student in long sleeves and a hijab, sizes up the different members of the group: one is there for "momentary anarchy," others are interested in the camaraderie, some just a flash of notoriety. Trenton's motivations are different: A first-generation Iranian-American, she has no illusions about capitalism after watching her immigrant parents struggle to make a life in the United States. "They won't shut up about how great America is," she tells Darlene (Carly Chaikin), an unstable fsociety coder with a strange relationship to Elliot. "But they're going to die in debt doing things they never wanted to do."

At least I think that's what *Mr. Robot* is about. It's impossible to be sure—the series shows us the world as Elliot sees it, disorienting and alienating. This is partly produced by the filmmaking—wide shots with characters haunting the corners of the frame; Elliot walking alone through washed-out city streets. From the beginning, we are shown glitches in the narrative and pronounced indications that Slater's character doesn't exist. Elliot is our only reliable source for what's happening, and he's not reliable at all. His diagnosis is left ambiguous: We know he's depressed, paranoid, addicted to morphine. We see his dreams and drug-induced hallucinations. Throughout the show, he speaks to us, the audience, as an imaginary friend. "I wish I could be an observer like you. ... Do you know more than me?" his voice-over asks. "That wouldn't be fair." When Elliot is given shattering news at one point, he seemingly grabs the invisible camera and throws it on the ground.

**IN MOST FICTIONAL** portrayals of hackers, technical mastery provides a fantasy of control—computer skills are all one needs to manipulate the world. The teenagers of *Hackers* were like superheroes, brandishing their powers to seemingly bend the laws of time and space. For most movie hackers, hammering at a keyboard yields instant results, which are shown on screen as whooshing tunnels of code. And in recent shows like the much-maligned *CSI: Cyber*, the criminals are dangerous beyond imagination, all our apocalyptic fears about the dark web come to life.

## Hairdresser

BY PAULA BOHINCE

Seated one, loved by the lavishing comb  
and fingers of another woman demon-  
strating how attention and technique coalesce  
into art. Where to go  
when the mother is gone.  
All occupations form to replace her.  
What relief to be a girl again for an hour,  
beneath the practiced wrists of her avatar.

*Paula Bohince's third collection, SWALLOWS AND WAVES, is forthcoming from Sarabande.*

The notorious leaks and security breaches of the last few years have only heightened that anxiety. But they have also provided us with a counter narrative of martyrdom: the prosecution of Aaron Swartz, followed by his suicide; Chelsea Manning in solitary confinement; Edward Snowden, exiled to Russia. And those narratives have made their way onto the screen, with, for instance, the 2013 film *The Fifth Estate*, a thriller that dramatizes the story of WikiLeaks, starring a gray-haired Benedict Cumberbatch as Julian Assange. Last year, Laura Poitras's documentary *Citizenfour* gave us a true depiction of a leaker, incorporating intimate footage of Snowden in Hong Kong. Like *Mr. Robot*, these works highlight the idealism of hacktivism and its risks.

Elliot and the other members of fsociety have a certain kind of power: They can hack hospital records and break people out of prison. But in *Mr. Robot*, the increased pervasiveness of the digital realm only upends reality, suffusing everything with unease. What do we know? What's real? Are we only the information we let float around on the internet—the social media profiles, passwords, browsing history? The smart characters in *Mr. Robot* erase all their data from public records, encrypting their identities. The only protection is to delete yourself.

*Mr. Robot* is one of the few TV shows to successfully portray subjective experience, the world as experienced by one damaged mind. Since Elliot has trained his mind to substitute E Corp's name with Evil Corp, the show does the same thing. *Mr. Robot's* convoluted plot twists aren't there to jerk us around, *True Detective*-style, or ramp up anticipation. Instead, the contradictory information leaves us as paranoid as Elliot, distrustful of everything we see. 🐼

# Songs by No One

Listen to the music,  
skip the biography.

BY SARA MARCUS

**“WATER BOY”** WAS already an old song when the folksinger Odetta performed her version of it at Carnegie Hall in 1960. Originating with African American convicts in Jim Crow Georgia, or so the story goes, the song’s lyrics give voice to parched laborers as they call for water and defend the value of their work. “There ain’t no hammer / that’s on this mountain / that ring like mine,” Odetta sang, and in her meaty contralto, the claim acquired echoes of Sojourner Truth’s 1851 “Ain’t I a Woman” speech (“Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted ... and no man could head me”). Halfway through her performance, Odetta added a vocal accent to her strumming and singing: a sharp, guttural *Waow!*, mimicking the sound of hammer striking rock that’s heard on field recordings of prison work songs. Part snarl, part half-swallowed scream, the sound Odetta made got a little louder and longer each time. By the end of the song, it verged on a roar.

Odetta is less well known today than her folk-revival compatriots Pete Seeger and Harry Belafonte. Bob Dylan credited her with igniting his interest in the genre. Martin Luther King Jr. is said to have called her the “queen of American folk music.” She sang “Oh Freedom” at the March on Washington in 1963. Yet there is no biography of her, no feature-length documentary or biopic. Anyone who seeks out the music she recorded over her half-century-long career is obliged to listen without a very detailed picture of the life she lived. This is an injustice. But it’s also an opportunity.

**SONGS CAN AND** often do outlive their singers. Streaming services like YouTube and Spotify, with their unprecedented access to vast searchable archives, allow a new way of listening: Instead of tracking an individual artist over a necessarily brief slice of time, we can follow particular songs across decades, chart their transit from one generation to the next, opening up different vantage points on history. “See That My Grave Is Kept

Clean” was first recorded by Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1927 and again by Mavis Staples this year. The seventeenth-century English ballad “Matty Groves” had by 1800 morphed into the Appalachian “Shady Grove.” Each new version carries traces of where the song has been before and perhaps even an anticipation of where it might go next. When we listen to all of this, tuning in to form and flux over the years, we get an encounter with music that places us both in and out of time, revealing how the present is entwined with the *longue durée* of history and art.

Greil Marcus takes this form of listening to marvelous extremes in his two most recent books, last September’s *History of Rock ‘n’ Roll in Ten Songs* and this fall’s *Three Songs, Three Singers, Three Nations*. As their titles suggest, these books track the journey of individual pieces of music across time: A representative chapter title is “‘All I Could Do Was Cry’: 2013/1960/2008.” Wildly, lyrically, Marcus writes in *Three Songs* of seemingly “authorless” compositions—songs by no one that belong to everyone, that change as they appear and reappear with new interpreters. “Breaking and entering,” he explains, “the song can retrieve its words from your subconscious; notes can compose a melody you sense but don’t hear.” In this alluring mystico-musicology, songs bend singers to their disembodied will, not vice versa: “The song writes itself,” and a particular singer may just stumble into “something the song always wanted to say.”



It was the 1920s when “Water Boy” became a staple of concert singers’ repertoires. An arrangement for voice and piano was published in 1922, and Paul Robeson recorded it three years later; he said he hoped that by singing this song he could show his audiences a shared core of human emotion transcending racial difference. It’s less clear whether the mid-century swing-band arrangements were all motivated by the same wish, and Jimmie Rodgers’s country music version of 1957 sounds so laid-back, it’s not evident it had any motivation at all. But “Water Boy” endured, and if its history seems to partly bear out Marcus’s idea about the power of songs over their singers, it also shows us something more: A song is never *just* having its way with a singer. Musicians are always doing the work of performance, of rewriting a song in real time.

The opera-trained Americana singer Rhiannon Giddens recorded a version for her debut solo album this year, changing its title to a single word, “Waterboy,” so it feels more like a nickname or term of endearment. Last February, she belted out her version on *Late Show With David Letterman*. It’s a brilliant performance. “If you don’t come right here,” she sings fiercely, “I’m gonna tell your pa on you.” There’s impatience in her voice—a woman who’s had it up to here with the son she’s calling down for dinner, let’s say. But at the same time she sounds terrified: What if the boy she calls isn’t answering because he can’t, because something horrible has happened to him?

If Giddens were to tell us in a memoir that she’d been thinking about her own child when she sang, it would make the line a poignant narrative moment. But really, what would that reveal that we don’t know from her performance? It might risk drowning out other information we already have: Michael Brown’s mother in tears at a press conference last summer; Mamie Till choosing an open coffin for her son in 1955; Jimmie Lee Jackson, shot protecting his mother in an Alabama café in 1965, days before marchers massed in Selma.

A singer of mixed African American, Native American, and Caucasian ancestry, Giddens is occasionally asked in interviews to offer up a personal explanation for her connection to the music she sings. On NPR’s *Morning Edition* last winter, Renee Montagne asked, “I know you’ve recorded songs in Gaelic. Is that your tradition?” You could hear Giddens kind of sigh—*OK, here we go*. “That whole idea of, is it *my* culture—you know,” she replied, “it gets asked of me in a way that white people who do blues music don’t get asked. I don’t know all of my genealogy, but my point is that if music speaks to you, I think that you have the ability to do that.” And she’s right to push back; when she sings Scottish folk, audiences don’t need a genealogical chart to know they’re witnessing something extraordinary.

These days we’re afflicted with not a scarcity but a glut of biographical information about musicians. 2015 alone has seen documentaries on Kurt Cobain, Amy Winehouse, and Nina Simone, in addition to tell-all memoirs by Kim Gordon, John Lydon, Carrie Brownstein, and many others. There’s some great writing in these books, but some unfortunate lily-gilding as well: “With those opening lines, ‘I am an anti-christ / I am an anarchist,’” Lydon tells us of the Sex Pistols’ “Anarchy in the U.K.” that “I wasn’t trying to set myself up as some kind of bogeyman.”

The present avalanche of documentaries and memoirs seems to insinuate that the music isn’t enough, that our encounters with songs aren’t complete until we know what the musician was thinking the night they cut the track. But biographical details, especially sources that seduce us into thinking we’re getting the true story of somebody’s inner life, aren’t necessarily the best way to hear a song or the history it carries in the present. The most powerful experiences we have with music often happen when we come into direct contact with the music itself, when the individual performer seems to fade into the background and we find ourselves confronted with a note or a feeling or a hiccup in the rhythm that knocks us over; when



Odetta in 1970.

what we hear isn’t just one artist’s story that we can identify with or not, or pity or envy or disdain, but something broader and deeper; when the music’s core, its durable form, comes sharply into focus.

When Giddens reaches the line “All the way to the jail,” history floods in, strong and wide. In the 1920s version of “Water Boy,”

## The most powerful experiences we have with music often happen when we come into direct contact with the music itself.

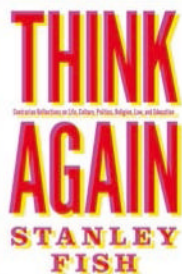
the line was “Back to the jail,” a clear explanation about convicts toiling on a roadside for the day. A young, Alabama-born singer who’d trained as a classical vocalist before joining the San Francisco folk circuit, Odetta first recorded the song in 1953 and ’54, as the Supreme Court was starting to consider *Brown v. Board of Education*; when she sang that line as “All the way to the jail” in 1960, listeners might have thought about the students being dragged away from Greensboro lunch counters. These days, as Giddens sings the line, she reels back into a hushed vibrato, and her magnetic hauteur crumples for a moment. What’s stunning about her singing in 2015 is not how different it might have sounded to a listener half a century ago, but how it might sound nearly the same. 🎵

# Swimming Upstream

The frustrating, enlightening, dizzying career of Stanley Fish.

BY WILLIAM GIRALDI

IN LITERARY ORBITS, to dub someone “academic” is just about the worst thing you can say about him—it means obscurantist and politicizer, an obfuscation expert blind to the beauty, wisdom, and pleasure of imaginative literature, but keen on social agendas, on the isms so in vogue in recent decades. Every corner of the nation needed the overdue social spasms of the 1960s. Literature, however, did not. Literature has always been quite all right just as it is. The complexities and felicities of great fiction and poetry won’t be reduced by theory, but that didn’t keep untold English professors from donning French-made lab coats and smuggling Cultural Studies clichés into their seminars. Those profs attempted social reform by dismantling the canon and succeeded only in dismantling their own relevance.



**THINK AGAIN**  
BY STANLEY FISH  
Princeton University  
Press, 448 pp., \$29.95

The above narrative usually forgets to credit the multitude of English professors who every semester infect their students with a much-needed love of literature. Good ideas can come from inside the castellated academy, ideas that enhance rather than impede the pleasures of literature. One such idea came out of Berkeley in 1967: Stanley Fish’s book *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, a dynamo of scholarship that intervened in a long-standing debate about how to handle Milton’s tremendous masterwork.

Before Fish, Miltonists tended to join one of two brigades: Those who, after

Blake, believed Milton to be in the devil’s back pocket, and those who, after C. S. Lewis, believed that Milton’s fealty was to God. Anyone can see that Satan is the beguiling hero-bard of Milton’s poem—he’s like a young Brando: You can’t take your eyes off him, and when he’s not on screen, you’re not happy. Milton’s Satan, Harold Bloom maintains, doesn’t *speaks* poetry, he *is* poetry, a matchless embodiment of the poetical sublime, and not to find him enticing and enlarging “is simply to fail to be have been found by him.” God and his lackeys, on the other hand, come across as supreme dullards who nevertheless comport with what we know was Milton’s own worldview. Fish’s inspired feat was to fuse those brigades by essentially allowing them both to be correct. Satan is a seditious and inebriating heartthrob, yes, and God is a baffling bore, true; but that was Milton’s intent, to have us thinking just that and then catch ourselves in transgression, *surprise* ourselves by the sin of siding with the devilish insurrectionist and his legion of harmony killers.

To read Fish in *Surprised by Sin* and *How Milton Works* (2001) is to commune with a scholar in supreme control of the literature and his own attitudes toward it, a scholar thrillingly authoritative, wholly convinced, giddy with aptitude. This is heaven-sent talent, regardless of whether or not you’re partial to his assessments: You can’t hit the ball like Serena, and you can’t read Milton like Fish. For nearly 50 years, *Surprised by Sin* has shepherded students and lay readers into the momentousness and mastery of a poet whose only overall better is Shakespeare. When you write a book that forever alters the way we read the greatest poem in our language, you can take the rest of your life off. But Stanley Fish was just getting started.

**TO READ ALL OF** Fish’s books in succession is a dizzying endeavor, and not because he is by turns entertaining and incisive and yawningly unintelligible, but because Fish isn’t only one Fish. Fish is, in fact, a whole school of Fish: Fish the Miltonist and theorist, Fish the lawyer and dean, Fish the columnist and cultural critic, Fish of the right and Fish of the left, Fish as Strunk and White, Fish the historian and film aficionado, Fish the religious commentator, Fish the philosopher and polemicist and pundit.

Across more than a dozen books and in his *New York Times* column from 1995 to 2013, Fish has written on virtually every vital cultural issue. In the 1980s, he morphed from an astute scholar of seventeenth-century literature (in addition to *Surprised by Sin*, his early books include a study of the poet George Herbert) into an opaque theorist of “interpretive communities.” His 1980 book *Is There a Text in This Class?* was a reader-response extravaganza taken seriously by both philosophers and fellow theorists. Human beings, he argues, are never truly free in their thoughts or speech because everything they think and say is a product of their histories, their “communities,” the undulations and vicissitudes of their selfhood. The same notion underpins much of his work on free speech, which he believes “is just a name we give to verbal behavior that serves

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARGHERITA MOROTTI

the substantive agendas we wish to advance,” just “a political prize” and never “an independent value.”

With his *New York Times* column, Fish added the “public” to “intellectual.” That visible platform permitted him to declaim in whatever register he chose, to rankle all whom he perceived as intellectually complacent or ideologically deluded. In his book *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech* (1994), published the year before he began his column, he’s clear about his targets: Those who give us “overheated and overdramatic characterizations of our situation, whether they come from the left or the right,” and those who betray what for Fish is a capital crime, a “willful disregard of history.” In the preface to that book, Fish warns: “Neither the defender of the status quo nor the proponent of radical change will find much comfort in these pages.” That nobody’s-safe incensing throughout Fish’s work, the volleys against both left and right, can look a touch like shtick, an overinsistence on his lone-wolf credentials when everybody knows that the career academic must by definition be a conformist: You don’t get very far without getting along. He has crafted himself into that sad marriage of contradictory terms reserved for the few: academic superstar.

Fish won’t traffic in the misplaced idealism that says an academic’s work can “shape the world.” Teachers, he reasons, are powerless to “fashion moral character, or inculcate respect for others, or produce citizens of a certain temper.” Teachers can and should, however, show students how Milton’s poetical majesty functions on the page, how Milton gives you the language for what happens to you while living, and in doing so, teachers can impart a passion for the personal efficacy of literature. In *Professional Correctness* (1996), Fish’s counsel for those many optimists on American campuses is this: “If you want to send a message that will be heard beyond the academy, get out of it.”

**F**

ish’s new book, *Think Again: Contrarian Reflections on Life, Culture, Politics, Religion, Law, and Education*, collects nearly a hundred of his *New York Times* columns, structured into eight blocks of “reflections”: personal, aesthetic, cultural, on politics, on law, on religion, on liberal arts education, and on academic freedom. The titles of his articles are intended to rile you from



the outset—“Two Cheers for Double Standards”; “Favoritism Is Good”; “Against Independent Voters”; “All You Need Is Hate”; “Tips to Professors: Just Do Your Job”—while the personal essays are a pumping handshake, a welcome that trumpets all of Fish’s average-guy qualities.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1938, Fish was the child of Polish Jewish immigrants, the first in his family to graduate college. He writes touchingly about his father, Max, a plumber, about his heroes growing up (Frank Sinatra and Ted Williams), and also about his durable obsessions (basketball and Jews). At his most comic and curmudgeonly, Fish gripes about his dread of travel, his aborted efforts at going green, his woes over the proper lightbulbs and paper towels, and the impossibility of winning a domestic quarrel: “You will try to clarify and sanitize your words by producing more words, but of course the more words you produce, the more weapons you provide the person who is sitting across from you at the breakfast table. (And who is he or she anyway? How did I ever get mixed up with anyone like that?)”



Of course our best reader of *Paradise Lost* would be interested in the public fracas over religion, so look at his take on the New Atheists, four pieces on those vociferous God killers Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens, and see if you can't spot Fish's opinions. "They are the apostles," he writes, "of the religion of science in its most reductionist form." *The religion of science*: Everywhere in his denigrations of Dawkins and company you see Fish equating science with faith so that science may be dismissed by the same means with which faith is dismissed. Dawkins's evidence for evolution, says Fish, "is evidence only because he is seeing with Darwin-directed eyes. The evidence at once supports his faith and is evidence by virtue of it." Darwin-directed eyes? I defy you to find piffle more thunderous than that. If you have evidence, you don't need faith: That's the point of evidence. "Science requires faith too before it can have reasons," Fish writes. You might make that true only if you overhaul the definitions of *science* and *faith*.

Fish does not come close to understanding that Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris—"shallow ... schoolyard atheists," he calls them—assault religion on precisely the same grounds on which billions believe it: They don't bother with the dulling tedium, the meanders and switchbacks of theological argument, because the global throngs don't bother with them. In *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2012), Fish rightly asserts that "intellectual work" concerns itself with "the evaluation, not the celebration, of interests, beliefs, and identities; after all, interests can be base, beliefs can be wrong, and identities are often irrelevant to an inquiry." And that is exactly what Dawkins and company are up to, the evaluation of beliefs *as they are believed*.

Fish's views have slapped a bull's-eye on his back: He's frequently shot at with the barbs "sophist" and "relativist," "fatalist" and "radical subjectivist." In a speech she gave at MIT in 1991, Camille Paglia, with perfect Paglian venom, called him "a totalitarian Tinkerbell." Terry Eagleton, British Marxist bloviator and anti-pescatarian, once likened Fish to (I'm not kidding) Joseph Stalin and Slobodan Milošević, and worse: "He is the Donald Trump of American academia, a brash, noisy entrepreneur of the intellect"—asserted with equal parts brashness and noise.

When someone once accused Lionel Trilling's politics of being "always in between," Trilling replied that "between is the only honest place to be," and Fish would assent to that. The conundrums of human living are too multiform and intractable to be pondered by the dichotomies of left or right, liberal or conservative. For Fish, we are all of us fallen, Adams and Eves bumbling through the postlapsarian cosmos. Original sin is real but not in the way Christianity would have you believe: We are fallen in the guarantee of our human imperfectability, our pathetic inadequacy at the utopian task (*utopia*, remember, literally means "nowhere"). In *The Trouble With Principle* (1999), Fish writes: "The main thing I believe is that conflict is manageable only in the short run and that structures of conciliation and harmony are forever fragile and must always be shored up, with uncertain success," and all you have to do is peek at your own life—your marriage, your friendships, your workplace—to see the oppressive accuracy of that.

**MUCH OF THINK AGAIN** will consternate no one already familiar with Fish's ideas. "What links the columns ... is a relentless internality"—a relentless internality? "My affinity," he writes, "is for self-contained, highly structured artifacts"—he means *art*, for God's sake—"that refuse political engagement and celebrate craft." Fish's politics are, he says, "antiliberal" because "liberalism, as a form of thought and a mode of political organization, privileges impartiality," and Fish, as you know, does not believe in a sprite called impartiality.

At his most astute, he employs a pitiless realism en route to truth, a loathsome honesty about human living: "There is no road from the precepts of high philosophy to the solution of any real-world problem," and "Personhood is not what remains after race, gender, ethnicity, and filial relationships have been discounted; rather, personhood is the sum of all these."

You've got to be a discriminating Goldilocks when you go to Fish's house: When he's too hot, in academic mode, he serves up jargon; when he's too cold, in everyman mode, he serves up cliché; but when he stirs the best of one porridge into the best of the other, he's just right—a pithy steward for his intellect and interests. Here he is trying to explain French theory in mangled prose only a French theorist could love: "The 'I' or subject, rather than being the freestanding originator and master of its own thoughts and perceptions, is a space traversed and constituted—given a transitory, ever-shifting shape—by ideas, vocabularies, schemes, models, and distinctions that precede it, fill it, and give it (textual) being." As you can see, each of those words is English, but as you can hear, English it is not.

In *How to Write a Sentence* (2011), Fish christens himself a "sentence watcher ... always on the lookout for sentences that take your breath away," and if he'd spend a minute more watching his own sentences, he might detect some of the clichés that disfigure many of them. Throughout *Think Again*, Fish relies on at-hand formulations: He'll go from "out of the blue" to "icy

**For Fish, we are all of  
us fallen, Adams and  
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you believe.**

blue eyes" to "icing on the cake"; then there's "every nook and cranny" before there's "everything under the sun" and "every waking hour." But then he'll unleash a sentence you want to carry around with you: "Strife, in progress or just around the corner, is the default condition of domesticity," or "What gives someone the high moral ground is that he or she is right, not that he or she is fair."

Fish might not always pass Nietzsche's test of being able to dance with a pen, but he escorts his personality to the page, and that's a welcome antidote to the tranquilizing homogeneity of style among so many American critics and essayists, especially those who come from the overprofessionalized academy. You are not obligated to agree with him and you are not obligated to like him, but if you care about the enlarging necessity of contest in cultural discourse, then you are obligated to read him, not with some magical "open mind"—Fish has no patience for that concept—but with the full force of the mind you have. 🐟

## White Noise

BY MONICA YOUN

Proleptic flinch  
of whiteness –

the hunch  
of shouldering

into it, stoic  
glitch zipping up

its jacket of static–  
knit fabric

of interlocking zs.  
the apotropaic

as abject, self-  
replicating reflex

of self-defense.  
Vain camouflage

that functions  
as neither shield

nor shelter:  
the canker's milk

nourishes nothing;  
the ice rink

exudes only  
its own doom.

Monica Youn is the author of *IGNATZ*, a finalist for the National Book Award, and her new book *BLACKACRE* is forthcoming from Graywolf Press in 2016.

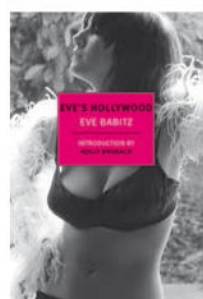
# Sex and the Intellect

Eve Babitz's Los Angeles face and New York mind.

BY NAOMI FRY

**THE EPIGRAPH TO** *Eve's Hollywood*, Eve Babitz's 1972 memoir in essays, is a snippet of conversation that the Los Angeles writer conceivably had with multiple interlocutors over the years: "Where are you from?" "Hollywood." "Born there too?" "Yeah." "What was it like?" "Different."

This assertion could be interpreted in at least a couple of ways. First, there is the usual meaning, which most of us think of when imagining what it's like to grow up in a Hollywood-like environment—palm trees, sexy blond girls, moneyed celebrities—and we would not be wrong. Another meaning exists, however. Take another girl—sexy, too, though only intermittently blond—growing up among the palm trees and the moneyed celebrities, but have her be the child of bohemian intellectual parents: a Jewish classical-musician father, a Texan artist mother. Have her pose nude playing chess with a considerably older, fully dressed Marcel Duchamp for an iconic photograph on the occasion of the artist's 1963 Pasadena Art Museum retrospective. Have her date the city's cultural elite—the artist Ed Ruscha, the gallerist Walter Hopps, the lizard king Jim Morrison, among others. And most important, have her be a writer—one who, in a series of memoiristic novels, short stories, and essays, documented both the inner and outer lives of being a sexy girl living in Hollywood amid the palm trees and the moneyed celebrities.



**EVE'S HOLLYWOOD**  
BY EVE BABITZ  
NYRB Classics, 328 pp.,  
\$17.95

But despite, or maybe partly because of, her sexiness and writerliness, Babitz has been largely forgotten. Her most recent book was published in 1995 to little recognition; and following an accident later in the decade in which ash from her cigarette set her skirt aflame

while she was driving, resulting in the permanent scarring of half her body, she went totally silent.

This happens to be a relatively good moment in which to reissue her work. Literary culture has grown more receptive—though, needless to say, not nearly receptive enough—to a reconsideration of older, so-called difficult women writers. Chris Kraus, whose 1997 novel, *I Love Dick*, which explored sexuality and self-abasement through its protagonist's infatuation with a colleague of her husband's, was rediscovered and became a hit in young feminist circles a couple of years ago; Renata Adler's terse woman-in-the-city experimental novels, *Speedboat* (1976) and *Pitch Dark* (1983), were reissued in 2013 to renewed appreciation and brought the writer out of a long seclusion in Connecticut.

Babitz's writing was never as overtly willful as Kraus's or Adler's, but there was still something essentially fuck-you about her attitude—"Smart and pretty and scornful and impatient" is how she describes her teenage self in one essay. Her self-depiction broke the binary according to which "people with brains went to New York and people with faces came West." Babitz had a Los Angeles face with a New York mind. She earned high school test scores that, as she zings, "were all incredibly high and not just because I cheated." She wrote deliberately ditzy things like "I spent the [Watts] riots in a penthouse at the Chateau Marmont," and she dedicated her first book to, among many other people and things, "the girl with the coke," "eggs Benedict at the Beverly Wilshire," and "the one whose wife would get furious if I so much as put his initials in." Her writing took multiple forms, from romans à clef to essayistic cultural commentaries to reviews to urban-life vignettes to short stories. But in the center was always Babitz and her sensibility—fun and hot and smart, a Henry James-loving party girl.

"**I LOOKED LIKE** Brigitte Bardot and I was Stravinsky's goddaughter," she wrote in an essay about veering away from her family's high-cultural roots, and despite her marvelous admission that the composer's music "excites me Russianly," there was something quintessentially American, and more specifically Californian, in Babitz and the world she describes in her writing. "(The) West ... is a serious place that should ALWAYS be capitalized," goes the brief note to the reader that opens *Eve's Hollywood*. The mythical capaciousness granted by the uppercase allows for Babitz's native abundance of gifts. Beauty and smarts and fame and sex and money were always there for women like her, dreamers of the golden dream. They had to tread carefully, though. As she notes in "A Confusing Tragedy," passive beauty, untethered to any self-directed will, can lead gorgeous women to disaster:

In grammar there is a noun and there are adjectives. Adjectives modify the noun, they alter it and cramp its style. I didn't want to be a Brownie girl, I just wanted to be a girl ... Marilyn kept putting herself in people's hands, believed them. They let her think she was just a shitty Hollywood actress and Arthur Miller was a brilliant genius whereas he was just another modifier in her already corseted life.

As she wrote in a piece based on the tortured musician and junkie Gram Parsons (whom she pseudonymously calls “James Byrns”), “It’s the frames which made some things important and some things forgotten. Van Gogh had to be a dead madman in order to be the right frame for his pictures ... And Picasso was always rich as was Stravinsky, because they were charming, strong, and sane. People believed them; it is packaging.” She created for herself the perfect, irresistible literary persona, with its own set of corsets: not just “the sexy girl” or “the smart girl,” but “the sexy *and* smart girl.” She also knew, however, that it was not enough, was sometimes even a hindrance. (As a friend told me recently, it’s possible to be a very good writer if you went to Yale and work as a dominatrix, but that isn’t *necessarily* the case.) You had to get beyond the packaging, which meant actually trying to be someone; in her case, a very fine writer, which indeed she was: a beautiful stylist whose flourishes were almost always carefully doled out, calibrated, and sure. She used language to become, metaphorically speaking, both upper-case and adjectiveless—to crack open her own product and achieve moments that exist just beyond it.

Babitz sought these occasions of ineffable clarity, and she calls them by various names—“real life”; “real stuff”; “disruption”; she likens them to “an alarm clock” or even, in one memorable example in an essay about deciding not to go to UCLA, to the jarring experience of seeing Marlon Brando in *Viva Zapata*. (In life, she explains, “you’ll be lucky to get even half” of what your heart desires, so you better “desire something enormous,” like the mythically sexy Brando, who makes everything else, including a college degree, seem dull by comparison.) These instances, moments “of perfume where everything [is] gone except for the dazzle,” usually brought on by a sense-heavy encounter with beauty—sometimes through sex or, even more often, the suggestion of sex—disturb the sameness of life and grant it meaning without ever revealing that meaning completely. It would be a mistake to confuse one of these moments with what Babitz refers to as “The Answer”—the thing people often seek out in drugs or religious dogma to give their lives consequence. “I didn’t want The Answer,” she writes of trying LSD for the first time, in 1966, with an older, more experienced friend. “I wanted the colors.” For her, it is always the case that, rather than four, “Two plus two equals pink.”

How beautiful is that? The joy of Babitz’s writing is in her ability to suggest that an experience is very nearly out of language while still articulating its force within it. The voice of one of her first lovers “was exactly like chocolate, it was like

chocolate chocolate chocolate”; the tiny, nubby shoes of C.C., an idolized Mexican girl in her junior high, “made your feet look like eraser stubs”; an enigmatic, beautiful high school classmate’s “hair was thick, silky, waved carelessly and slid with a separate gravity. ... forward and ... back,” its heft swinging with the pendulum force of those ellipses. Babitz observes, and she remembers. “Everyone knows it’s the details that matter,” she writes, and she is nothing if not a close reader.

The piercing realness with which she identifies these moments does not necessarily equal the chaos of everyday experience. Instead, there is in her writing a toggling between the control that form allows and the more haphazard life crowding it with content. This back-and-forth is not unlike the performed experience of being a woman, especially a so-called brains *and* face, a noun *and* its adjectives, a package but not. It’s also the experience of being a crafter of narratives. In the book’s final story, “The Rendezvous,” Babitz describes the end of an affair with a married man:

What she wanted to do was to end it, but she wanted the finish to be so gorgeous that the whole episode would stand away from ordinary life as an enameled example of something handled as though someone cared, for once, for the shape of the thing, the form.

The protagonist—a nameless Babitz double—is a Southern California Hedda Gabler who urges herself to “make it beautiful” and fashion the breakup as “a piece of human art so that she could go on cleanly broken.” The rendezvous,

however, ends up going comically wrong (along with the dyadic switch between intellectual and vixen, there is more than a dash of the comedic Jewess in Babitz—the hypermobile, wisecracking neuroticism of a Carrie Fisher or a Babs Streisand). The restaurant at which the couple meets, with its sizzling shrimp and shared tables, is not conducive to an art-for-art’s-sake type of goodbye. The married man, too, is not exactly as Babitz had recalled him—less abstract, detached idea and more actual person (“he looked, she felt surprised again, like someone she loved”). But the fact that the meeting was a “jagged prologue” rather than a “polished finish” doesn’t mean that the former option is more valuable than the latter. Babitz is still a writer who has “a mania for outer shine,” a desire just as strong as her distaste for the type of packaging that fully contains its insides. Being in love with Los Angeles, as Babitz is, means never knowing whether beauty will be attached to truth or to deception. In Babitz’s world, it’s often attached to both. ☞

*Author at Polar  
Palace during  
Twisted Days  
(photo by booth)*



*Author, age 15,  
in school photo  
from Marshall  
High.*



*Author in booth  
in New York City,  
perishing from  
Consumption of  
claustrophobic  
environs.*

From “Scrapbook Hollywood,” a chapter with handwritten notes by Babitz.

# The Dead Who Do Not Vanish

Reckoning with Indonesia's bloody history in the fiction of Eka Kurniawan.

BY SIDDHARTHA DEB

**THREE-QUARTERS OF** the way into *Beauty Is a Wound*, the sprawling, ambitious novel by the Indonesian writer Eka Kurniawan, there is a curious scene at a cemetery. A man has just been buried there, a Communist killed in the civil war erupting throughout the country in the mid-'60s, and his daughter Farida refuses to leave the site of his grave. She attracts the attention of Kamino, the lonely cemetery caretaker whose skills, along with interring the dead, include an ability to raise them back up through a practice called *jailangkung*. Entranced by Farida, Kamino offers to contact her father's spirit, and the young woman ends up staying with him even as fresh corpses are brought in from what has turned into a one-sided massacre. Eventually, there are so many bodies that Kamino has to resort to mass burials, but this does not interrupt his growing romance with Farida. Kamino calls up the spirit of the dead Communist every evening, who, taking possession of Kamino's body, chats with Farida, "as if it was just like any other night ... as if death didn't exist."

There is much dying in the novel, for major characters, for supporting figures, for wild boars and for wild dogs, but death usually offers no finality. Corpses are dug up, cross-dressed, and put on motorcycles. Communist ghosts lurk everywhere, so that when an elderly Dutch couple visit a decade after the civil war and learn about them, the man retorts, "Karl Marx already warned us about that in the first paragraph of his *Manifesto*." Then there is the central character of the novel, the beautiful and enterprising prostitute Dewi Ayu, who is introduced to us in this fashion in the opening lines: "One afternoon on a weekend in March, Dewi Ayu rose from her grave after being dead for 21 years. ... She had passed away at 52, rose again after

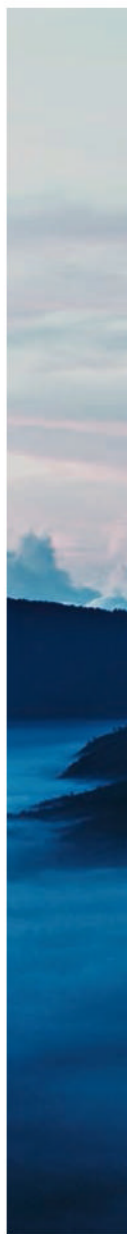
being dead for 21 years, and from that point forward nobody knew exactly how to calculate her age."

Does death exist in the realm of Kurniawan's fiction or not? Told by an omniscient narrator, jumping back and forth across an Indonesian twentieth century that includes the final stage of 300 years of Dutch colonialism, the Japanese invasion during World War II, the liberation struggle and decolonization after the war, internal tensions, rebellions, a genocidal massacre in the mid-'60s, totalitarian rule for three decades, and the bloody occupation of East Timor, *Beauty Is a Wound* is full of dead people who nevertheless refuse to vanish.

**TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH** for the first time, *Beauty Is a Wound* is a novel making a claim about capturing a nation, its resurrection of Ayu a prologue to Kurniawan's depiction of the coming of age of Indonesia as a modern, twentieth-century entity cobbled together out of more than 17,000 islands, 700 languages, and with the largest Muslim population in the world as well as significant minority populations of Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. This transformation of many cultures into a nation is also the focus of *Man Tiger*, Kurniawan's other work to appear in English, even if this latter book is written in a contrasting style, just as taut and lean as *Beauty Is a Wound* is sprawling and capacious. Its focus is for the most part on a young man called Margio who lives in a small, unnamed village on the Indian Ocean, a place far from the metropolitan centers and seemingly cut off from the excesses of history. But just as *Beauty Is a Wound* uses Ayu's resurrection as an opening move for the exploration of a nation, *Man Tiger* begins with an equally dramatic incident that will also have to be unpacked for its larger, societal meaning. This is the brutal killing of a middle-aged playboy named Anwar Sadat (not the assassinated Egyptian president), whose throat is ripped out by Margio. As we read on, we learn the killing has really been carried out by a magic tigress, "white as a swan or a cloud or cotton wool," who has come to live inside Margio, a creature connected to the past of Margio and his people.

The feisty, opinionated, and resourceful Ayu embodies the intersection of past and present in a different manner. Born into a family of Dutch plantation owners but with a native woman as one of her grandmothers, Ayu grows up a privileged young woman in the fictional port town of Halimunda. But her colonial entitlements are brutally swept aside by the Japanese occupation, and she is imprisoned and forced into prostitution. Nevertheless, as Ayu remakes herself into the most desired prostitute in Halimunda in the decades after decolonization, she becomes the moral center of the novel, capable of humanity, wisdom, and joy even as the world around her turns dark and bloody.

Ayu is mother to four daughters, Alamanda, Adinda, Maya, and the eponymous Beauty. To these daughters are drawn the men who will determine the bloody course of nationhood and





*Mount Bromo III* by Martin Westlake

modernity in Halimunda: the violent former guerrilla and military commander Shodancho, who forcibly takes Alamanda as a wife; Maman Gendeng, a martial arts fighter and gangster who is first Ayu's lover and then Maya's husband; and Comrade Kliwon, a leader of the fishermen's trade union loved by Alamanda, loathed by Shodancho (who runs giant mechanized fish trawlers), and married to Adinda. From these pairings come the children who form the final generation of the novel, who are no more free of ghosts than previous generations, as Ayu realizes on her return from the grave.

*Beauty Is a Wound* was first published in Indonesia in 2002, at the beginning of a period of national reckoning that started with the downfall of the dictator Suharto in 1998. The arrival of the novel's English translation some 13 years later marks

another point in this process of coming to terms with what was one of the cold war's largest and yet most obscure atrocities. Between 500,000 and two million members and sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party were killed from 1965 to 1966, butchered by army squads, vigilante gangs, and Islamist groups. An estimated 750,000 more were imprisoned and tortured, among them Indonesia's best-known writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who orally composed his anti-colonial quartet of novels in the notorious Buru prison and whose works remained banned for almost his entire lifetime.

The event that provoked the massacre, the killing of six generals by a group of supposedly leftist officers was, Cornell scholar Benedict Anderson suggests, a setup by Suharto, at the time an army general. Suharto used the army's newspapers

to print fictitious accounts of the sexually deviant acts committed by women members of the party with the corpses of the slain generals (and who would later make the viewing of a slasher-style film version of this compulsory in Indonesia) and unleashed what turned out to be a phenomenally successful mass-extinction campaign, eliminating the Indonesian Communist Party from the political landscape and deposing the president, Sukarno. Once he had installed himself as leader and was established as a close ally of the United States, Suharto remained in power until the reverberations of the Asian currency crisis in 1997 and massive protests against him brought an end to his one-man rule a year later.

In the aftermath of Suharto's exit, stories of the massacre have begun to reassert themselves in the manner of Kurniawan's restless ghosts and magical tigers. In the West, such remembrance has been provoked by the documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012), directed by the American filmmakers Joshua Oppenheimer and Christine Cynn, and an anonymous Indonesian filmmaker, which tracks a group of vigilantes as they reenact their brutality for the camera. This has been followed by *The Look of Silence* (2014), focusing on a relative of one of the victims.

In Indonesia, efforts to recall and mourn the past have included the publication, in 2012, of a report by the Indonesian Human Rights Commission on the army's role in the killings; attempts at reconciliation by individual members of a Muslim mass organization also implicated in the slaughter; and screenings of the two documentaries made by Oppenheimer.

Kurniawan's political awakening seems to have proceeded in step with this larger process and worked its way into his books. A philosophy student from a provincial background at the Gadjah Mada University in the city of Jogjakarta, he was radicalized as a thinker and writer while throwing stones against

the police in the anti-Suharto protests of the late '90s and the clandestine dissemination, by a semiunderground left party, of Toer's banned Buru quartet novels. He would go on to write his dissertation on Toer, which was rejected by his university faculty review committee when he first presented it in early 1998 because Toer was a dissident figure but easily approved when he submitted it again after Suharto's ouster.

Nevertheless, when it came to artistic practice, Kurniawan clearly wanted an approach other than Toer's, with its accumulation of details and its steady, linear narrative. So while Toer's

***Man Tiger* and *Beauty Is a Wound* constitute a retort from the present to the dark times while also acknowledging that the dark times may not yet be over.**

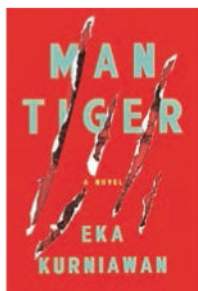
quartet is comprehensive in nature, each novel building upon its predecessor, *Beauty Is a Wound* depends heavily on sudden shifts in time and scene. Moreover, from its opening line, reminiscent of the flashback-flash forward disorientation of the famous first sentence of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, its use of the fictional realm of Halimunda to tell the story of a nation, its powerful female characters, and its identification with the underclass being swept aside as brutally by despotic nationalism as it was by old-school colonialism, Kurniawan's novel seems far closer to the tradition of Latin American magic realism of the "Boom" era of the 1960s and '70s than to Toer's writing.

But if magic realism is all there is to *Beauty Is a Wound*, there would be something anachronistic about it, as if Kurniawan, unaware of the evolution of the novel elsewhere, had been working away in a literary Madagascar. He was born in 1975, almost a decade after the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and there is reason to see influences that are much more contemporary. An energetic blogger, Kurniawan has written about the close affinity he feels with the Chilean novelist Alejandro Zambra, who portrays a Chile that traveled a path very similar to Indonesia's, where the army general Augusto Pinochet followed up a CIA-backed coup with the torture and killing of leftists and heavy doses of neoliberal economics.

*Beauty Is a Wound* wants, at one level, to remember what happened and, in the process, restore dignity to those tortured and killed. Yet in spite of the immense brutality depicted in the novel, there are no one-dimensional oppressors, not the Dutch, not the Japanese, and not even the cold, violent Shodancho, who directs the anti-Communist massacre in Halimunda and



**BEAUTY IS A WOUND**  
BY EKA KURNIAWAN,  
TRANSLATED BY ANNIE TUCKER  
New Directions, 480 pp., \$19.95



**MAN TIGER**  
BY EKA KURNIAWAN,  
TRANSLATED BY  
LABODALIH SEMBIRING  
Verso, 192 pp., \$18.95

is a rapist many times over. This is less a matter of the psychological complexity of the characters and more an aspect of the novel's plot, which periodically introduces a new twist into the story and forces a fresh response from the characters. An oppressor can become a victim from such a turn of events, or a playboy an activist. It is not hard to see, in such morphing of story and character, the wide-ranging influences behind Kurniawan's fiction, including the West Javanese ones identified by Annie Tucker, the translator of *Beauty Is a Wound*, who writes that it draws from "the bawdy wit and epic scope of *wayang* theater; the folk tales for which the region is famous; and Indonesian horror and martial arts genre fiction."

Kurniawan's blog reveals a voracious reader who forages far and wide in the manner of an autodidact blissfully free of the derivative cultural norms popular among non-Western national elites or the regimented aesthetic ideas promoted by Western creative writing programs. He writes that he leapt from reading Indonesian pulp fiction in his childhood to devouring a world canon of Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, García Márquez, Knut Hamsun, and Dostoyevsky. One can see something of both realms in *Beauty Is a Wound*, from its surprising leaps in plot and bursts of comedy to its ambition in depicting the making and unmaking of a nation.

That wide range of reading might also explain the testing, experimental nature of his writing and how *Man Tiger*, at least formally, is so different from *Beauty Is a Wound*. If the latter is an epic novel, the former gives the impression of being built upon a close observation of life in the provinces, where the young men are migrant workers in the cities and the women they court pine away for their letters and go every Monday to the village hall for the weekly arrival of the postman. The houses and huts are small, the people all known to one another, but the rural characters possess a stark grandeur and take on a disturbing familiarity as the narrative begins to linger over scenes of killing and a burial gone horribly wrong.

Here, too, in a place seemingly far removed from the tremors of history, are the ghosts of Indonesia's bloody past. We see, as the story falls back in time from its dramatic opening, Margio's growing rage as he, his sister, and their mother, Nuraeni, are subjected to terrifying violence by Komar bin Syueb, the barber who is Margio's father. This is followed by the deft seduction of Nuraeni by Sadat, in whose house she works as a maid. As in *Beauty Is a Wound*, Kurniawan is exceptionally sensitive to women and children trapped in a brutal, self-interested patriarchal world and one feels, in the frustration and heartbreak of the moody Margio, in his growing anger at his father and Sadat, an indictment of an entire generation of violent patriarchs—Suharto and his henchmen—who handed out suffering to those they claimed as their own.

It is easy to think that the novel, whether representing the coming of age of a character or of a nation, is bound to follow the bourgeois European model of *bildung*, or education, with protagonists finding calm and acceptance after their growing pains, and with nations reaching the flatland of the end of history after theirs. What Kurniawan suggests is that this is a false

## Drifters Afterschool

BY DOUGLAS KEARNEY

King's croak and oleo some throatwork that took my mind  
off eating jelly with Jif with.

a yellow,

I had to know: do I have soul?

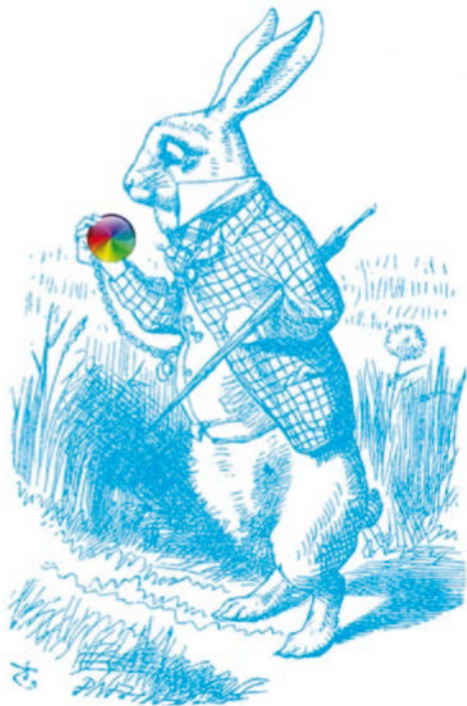
I had to ask the brown one who knew said "son"  
through gin baleen then leaned his bulk  
to cello squalls, up for air,  
breached that deep,  
made to scrape  
the popcorn ceiling. roof—my mouth's—  
I tongued the mush of Wonder®.

first you bust the shell,  
you mash the nut,  
you strip the vine, crush concords flat,  
you get the loaf, the knife. "son,"

up to his head tone, there goes his baby  
who'd know that whiff of fun soon was booze, who'd drift.  
I won't cry, I won't cry.  
that crown of a crooner's gone now.  
I don't call.

Douglas Kearney teaches poetry and African American studies at the California Institute of the Arts.

model for much of the world and that the past is not over and done with quite so easily. In that sense, both *Man Tiger* and *Beauty Is a Wound* constitute a retort from the present to the dark times, while also acknowledging that the dark times may not yet be over. Against the killings of those years and the collective amnesia used to blank out the fate of the victims—a kind of second death, as it were—Kurniawan's fiction summons its legions of ghosts. Against the strongmen who presided over violence and abuse, it raises the dead Dewi Ayu and brings to life a magic tigress hungry for justice. 🐾



# Down the Rabbit Hole

The rise, and rise,  
of literary annotation.

BY EVAN KINDLEY

**HUMPTY DUMPTY WAS** Lewis Carroll's first annotator, but he wouldn't be the last. When Alice meets Humpty, about halfway into *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, he's fairly obnoxious, rudely telling her she has "no more sense than a baby." When she admits to not knowing what he means by the phrase "There's glory for you!," he replies, "Of course you don't—till I tell you." Nevertheless, Alice courteously asks him for help in deciphering a strange poem she has encountered earlier in her travels:

"You seem very clever at explaining words, sir," said Alice.  
"Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called 'Jabberwocky?'"

"Let's hear it," said Humpty Dumpty. "I can explain all the poems that were ever invented—and a good many that haven't been invented yet."

In the ensuing pages, he offers glosses on puzzling words like *slithy* ("‘lithe and slimy’ ... You see it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word") and *outgrabe* ("something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle").

Some might describe Humpty's patronizing, pompous tone as mansplaining (or maybe, given the source, "eggspaining"). But plenty of readers will understand the urge to provide definitions and interpretations as well as Alice's desire to hear them. In recent years, more and more of us are reading annotated editions of our favorite books—*The Annotated Wuthering Heights*, *The Annotated Lolita*, *The Annotated Anne of Green Gables*—as well as posting on sites like Genius.com, which claims to host more than a million annotated texts, and sharing notes and highlights on Kindle. Never before has there been so much activity in the margins of culture.

**WHAT MAKES A** good annotator? It's some combination, apparently, of excess and restraint: an instinct for when to tell us more than we need to know (or more than we knew there was to know) balanced with a refusal to bore us. The obvious is, obviously, out: Most readers of Carroll probably won't need to be told what croquet is, for instance. More difficult is distinguishing between an alluring obscurity and a total waste of time. Not all rabbit holes are worth going down.

This is a question that Genius, whose slightly megalomaniacal slogan is "Annotate the world," is still grappling with. The site launched in 2009 as Rap Genius, devoted to the explication of rap lyrics. These origins have been the occasion for a lot of dismissive jokes, but it makes perfect sense that an annotation web site would orient itself toward such a dense, allusive art form. Rap, like Carroll's writing, is full of mysteries that cry out for explanation: Think of the Wu-Tang Clan's mix of Five Percenter lingo, references to kung fu films, and drug trade slang, for instance, or Kendrick Lamar's brash collages of personal confession and black history. It's also, as with children's literature, an often disrespected genre that inspires a passionate devotion in highly intelligent people who are ready to sound the depths of their pleasures in order to prove the skeptics wrong.

Rap remains Genius's bread and butter, but last year, after receiving \$40 million in venture capital funding from Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert, the company shortened its name and impressed the media world by hiring cultural critic Sasha Frere-Jones away from *The New Yorker* to be its executive editor. (Frere-Jones has since departed to work at the *Los Angeles Times*.) Recently, Genius has been making an ambitious effort to expand into areas beyond music: There is Lit Genius, News Genius, History Genius, Law Genius, and so on. The company has supported "Genius Teaching Fellowships" for academics and brought in such authors as Junot Díaz, Sheila Heti, and Jeff VanderMeer, alongside Eminem, Nas, and A\$AP Rocky, as "verified artists." Most recently, it has entered the political arena, collaborating with Hillary Clinton's staff to offer an annotated version of her campaign kickoff speech.

Genius, like Wikipedia, is crowd-sourced: It lets anyone contribute "tates" (short for annotations), which can then be rated by other users. "Texts on Genius are living documents,"

the site's About page reads. "Over time, they transform into definitive guides as people just like you from around the world add bits of knowledge to them." Below this grandiloquent ad copy, an animated GIF shows the steady evolution of the page for Carroll's "Jabberwocky" as users layer on multiple annotations. It's an impressive display. But the claim that it reflects Genius's "accretive magic in action" is a little weak, given that, last I checked, 13 out of the 27 annotations on the "Jabberwocky" page include direct quotations from a single source: Martin Gardner's *The Annotated Alice*.

**WHEN IT COMES** to explanations of Carroll's books, no one has yet improved on the work of Gardner. One of the twentieth century's great polymaths, he was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1914, and attended the University of Chicago, where he studied philosophy with Rudolf Carnap and writing with Thornton Wilder. For years he wrote the beloved Mathematical Games column for *Scientific American* and published books on everything from how-to guides on close-up card magic to a biography of Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy.

Gardner was brilliant but, unlike Humpty Dumpty, he was humble. Robert Weil, Gardner's editor in the final decades of his life (he died in 2010), told me he remembers him as "an intensely modest and sweet man. ... He was like a kid plucked out of *The Wizard of Oz*. ... The prairie wonderment and innocence never left him, even in his nineties." But he also had an impish sense of humor (he once panned one of his own books in *The New York Review of Books* writing under the pseudonym George Groth) and a hyper-logical intelligence: both important prerequisites for understanding the mind of Charles Dodgson, the Oxford mathematician better known as Lewis Carroll, who spent his spare time writing nonsense epics for children.

It was Gardner's idea that the *Alice* books should be annotated; he first asked the great logician Bertrand Russell to write the notes, but when Russell declined, Gardner stepped in to do the job himself. Children's literature was not a respectable object of scholarly attention at that time, and Gardner's introduction opens somewhat apologetically. He concedes that "there is something preposterous about an annotated *Alice*" before offering a defense of the undertaking: "No joke is funny unless you see the point of it, and sometimes a point has to be explained." And Carroll, he reminds us, was a uniquely hermetic writer:

In the case of *Alice* we are dealing with a very curious, complicated kind of nonsense, written for British readers of another century, and we need to know a great many things that are not part of the text if we wish to capture its full wit and flavor. It is even worse than that, for some of Carroll's jokes could be understood only by residents of Oxford, and other jokes, still more private, could be understood only by the lovely daughters of Dean Liddell.

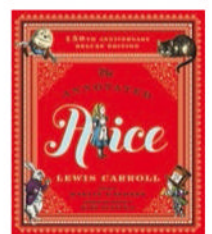
What follows does far more than explain Carroll's jokes (though it does that, too). Gardner's marginal text is encyclopedic, gathering together a small mountain of biographical and

bibliographical information on Carroll with much else besides. At times it functions as a field guide to Victorian England, describing such unfamiliar items as "bathing machines" ("small individual locker rooms on wheels") and "comfits" ("hard sweetmeats made by preserving dried fruits or seeds with sugar and covering them with a thin coating of syrup"). Gardner tells us that when Carroll was writing, "there was considerable popular speculation about what would happen if one fell through a hole that went straight through the center of the earth." He diagrams every movement made by characters in *Through the Looking-Glass*, whose narrative Carroll carefully modeled on a game of chess. He points out allusions to the *Alice* books by later

## **What makes a good annotator? It's some combination of excess and restraint: an instinct for when to tell us more than we need to know with a refusal to bore us.**

authors (T.S. Eliot in "Burnt Norton," James Joyce throughout *Finnegans Wake*) and provides the originals of the mostly forgotten songs and poems that Carroll parodied. We learn that the phrase "mad as a hatter" probably arose because "the mercury used in curing felt ... was a common cause of mercury poisoning," and that "Victorian children actually had dormice as pets, keeping them in old teapots filled with grass or hay."

Gardner was a philosopher by training, and his most intricate and idiosyncratic annotations tend to reflect this. When Tweedledee and Tweedledum inform Alice that she's "only a sort of thing" being dreamed of by the slumbering Red King, Gardner notes that it "plunges poor Alice into grim metaphysical waters. The Tweedle brothers defend Bishop Berkeley's view that all material objects, including ourselves, are only 'sorts of things' in the mind of God. Alice takes the commonsense position of Samuel Johnson, who supposed that he refuted Berkeley by kicking a large stone." He makes a convincing case that Carroll was fascinated by symmetry and left-right reversals, as was Gardner himself (in 1964, he published *The Ambidextrous Universe*, an entire book on the subject). One of his strangest and most entertaining digressions involves Alice's suspicion that "Looking-glass milk isn't



**THE ANNOTATED  
ALICE**  
EDITED BY MARTIN  
GARDNER  
W.W. Norton & Company,  
364 pp., \$39.95



good to drink,” which he delightedly confirms, based on the latest discoveries in particle physics (circa 1960): “It now appears likely that particles and their antiparticles (that is, identical particles with opposite charges) are ... nothing more than mirror-image forms of the same structure,” he writes. “If this is true, then looking-glass milk would be composed of ‘anti-matter,’ which would not even be drinkable by Alice; both milk and Alice would explode as soon as they came in contact.”

**THE ANNOTATED ALICE** was an unlikely best-seller. It has now been translated into Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Hebrew, among other languages; in 2005 Gardner estimated it had sold more than a million copies worldwide. Besides catalyzing academic interest in *Alice*, it helped to secure Carroll’s reputation with the reading public and to reassert—nearly a decade after Disney’s watered-down animated adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*—the intricacy and specificity of his imagination.

Just as importantly, though, *The Annotated Alice* gave rise to a new popular genre. Though scholarly annotations, especially of biblical or ancient texts, had been around for millennia, annotations of modern books for popular audiences were a novelty in the 1960s. In the wake of Gardner’s volume, his publisher Clarkson Potter would bring out *The Annotated*

*Mother Goose*, *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, *The Annotated Wizard of Oz*, *The Annotated Shakespeare*, and *The Annotated Oscar Wilde*. Others established themselves as master annotators: the science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, for instance, produced annotated versions of *Don Juan*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Gulliver’s Travels* in the 1970s and ’80s. Gardner himself went on to annotate Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark*, Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and G.K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*.

The list of books that have been annotated for a popular audience is now in the high dozens. We’ve had annotated editions of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Origin of Species*. Several titles—including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Frankenstein*, *Little Women*, and the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft—have been annotated more than once. Most of these texts, it should be noted, are in the public domain, a fact that helps explain competing editions like the two annotated versions of *The Wind in the Willows* published in 2009. According to Weil, Norton will soon offer an *Annotated African American Folk Tales*, by Henry Louis Gates and Maria Tatar, and an *Annotated Classics* overseen by Mary Beard.

Though literary works of all kinds have been submitted to the Gardner treatment, children’s classics are by far the most frequently annotated. “I think it needs a component of children’s and adult,” Weil said. “I imagine a parent reading with his or her child.” It’s essential, according to Weil, that these volumes have a “festive” quality; many of them are pegged to anniversaries, like the centennial of *Peter Pan* and the fiftieth anniversary of *The Phantom Tollbooth*. In many cases, they sell to adults who loved these books as kids and are interested in revisiting them in greater depth.

Annotation is a form of literary lingering: It allows us to prolong our experience with a favorite book, to hang around the world of a beloved text a bit longer. But it can also serve as a gateway, for younger readers, to the pleasures of scholarship, by pointing to a larger universe of knowledge beyond. I first read *The Annotated Alice* at the age of eleven, and I was fascinated by its wealth of recondite information. I’m not quite sure why, at that stage of my life, I was interested in the fact that, say, the man in the folded paper hat in one of John Tenniel’s *Alice* illustrations resembles British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli; I’m sure I’d never even heard of Disraeli. And yet I was interested; the book taught me how to be curious about such things. Leafing through Norton’s new anniversary edition, I was surprised at how many of Gardner’s notes I remembered vividly, like his reflection on Carroll’s fondness for the number 42, or Humpty Dumpty’s aristocratic habit of offering his inferiors a single finger to shake. And then there’s this remarkable passage from Gardner’s introduction about nonsense as “a way of looking at existence ... akin to religious humility and wonder,” which left a lasting impression on me:

It is part of the philosophic dullness of our time that there are millions of rational monsters walking about on their hind legs, observing the world through pairs of flexible little

lenses, periodically supplying themselves with energy by pushing organic substances through holes in their faces, who see nothing fabulous whatever about themselves. Occasionally the noses of these creatures are shaken by momentary paroxysms.

This is still the most terrifying description of sneezing I've ever read.

# G

ardner probably would have liked the idea of Genius. His 1990 sequel, *More Annotated Alice*, is mostly made up of discoveries and conjectures sent in by readers over the years, each one duly credited for their contribution; as editor Mark Burstein points out in his preface to the new anniversary edition, “*Avant la lettre*, he was a great believer in crowd-sourcing.” But he might have faulted the execution. Besides “Jabberwocky,” a number of works by Carroll, including the first chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, have been annotated by the Genius community—with mixed results. Again there are insights cribbed from Gardner and other established commentators, but also fresh “tates” of varying quality. For the sentence “So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her,” for instance, we get this, added a year ago by an annotator named EwokABDevito:

A daisy-chain is an easy-to-make fashion accessory that consists of a string of daisies tied together by their stems: [Insert picture of little girl with daisy chain in her hair here.] Alice is somewhat ‘bored’ with her existence; even though she is very young and inexperienced, her imagination needs *more* stimulation to keep her inspired and active.

Whether or not the reader needs “daisy-chain” defined, she certainly doesn’t need this prosaic recapitulation of Alice’s

mood, which tells us nothing that Carroll doesn’t already convey. Moreover, EwokABDevito has missed the dramatic point of the sentence completely: This is the introduction of the White Rabbit, a pivotal character in the story whose appearance would seem to deserve some kind of comment.

The usual knock against Genius is that its annotations are incorrect, irrelevant, or offensive, and this is often true. But in some ways the site’s designers may have overcorrected for this problem. In a thoughtful essay on Slate, Katy Waldman notes that Genius, in its brave attempt at “democratizing close reading,” can sometimes play it too safe; the site’s “upvote/downvote system” tends to push “safe, sensible, defensible glosses to the top. These are the Ike Eisenhowers of exegesis, the takes a majority can get behind.” The advantage of having a singular, as opposed to a collective, intelligence in charge of annotating a text is not just that it helps keep things on track; it’s also that it can let things get weird when they need to. “I see no reason why annotators should not use their notes for saying anything they please if they think it will be of interest, or at least amusing,” Gardner declares in his introduction to *More Annotated Alice*. But even tangents require a judgment call. The problem with many of the Genius annotations of the *Alice* books isn’t that they’re wildly off base; it’s that they’re dull.

That isn’t a reason to discount Genius’ annotation technology entirely, of course, which may well help to usher in a renaissance of online scholarship. The site has already begun to build exegetical communities around undervalued parts of



our culture. A database is only as good as its users, and it’s quite possible that a twenty-first-century Martin Gardner would gravitate toward Genius, or something like it, gradually building up authority and prestige in the community through feats of mental strength. This may be what the site needs to do to be more than a web 2.0 gimmick: Find today’s Gardners, and let them cultivate its soil. 🐇

# An Insatiable Egoist

Can a new biography keep up Gore Vidal's sprawling legacy?

BY **BLAKE BAILEY**

**THAT GORE VIDAL** had a monstrous ego is proverbial; that he liked to make fun of that fact, and anything else, is more so. “Never lose an opportunity to have sex or be on television,” he liked to say, and he meant it. In his salad days, especially, he was a connoisseur of a kind of bloodless, indefatigable cruising, and other than (perhaps) Norman Mailer, no American writer made such a fetish of his own celebrity. Jay Parini, an old friend of Vidal and now his latest biographer, remembers entering the great man's study in Ravello, Italy, and being struck by an entire wall of framed magazine covers featuring Gore Vidal. “When I come into this room in the morning to work,” Vidal explained, “I like to be reminded of who I am”.

In some respects Vidal, who died in 2012 at the age of 86, was a relic from an age of rarefied celebrity that is gone forever: the writer-hero who consorted with the Kennedys and pursued a political career in his own right; the sage whose con-

troversial opinions were constantly in demand; perhaps our best essayist of the last 50 years, one of our best historical novelists, an outrageous satirist, and an unabashed hack who made a mint writing left-handed screenplays and pseudonymous potboilers. Such a massive cultural figure deserves a first-rate biography, surely, and yet: What particular aspect of Vidal's polymathic output is most likely to endure?

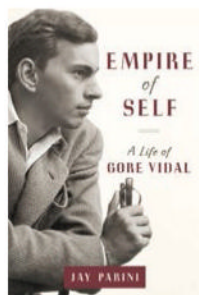
As shadows lengthen now across the greensward—as Vidal put it, by way of P.G. Wodehouse—how many discerning essay readers remain among us, and of those happy few how many would consider Vidal's novels to be worthy of comparable notice? Not enough to suit Vidal, safe

to say, who was haunted by a fear of the “Great Eraser” that had all but obliterated the reputation of his idol, William Dean Howells, the great realist author once known as “the Dean of American Letters.” On the other hand, this would seem to be Vidal's moment: Apart from this latest biography and at least two controversial memoirs (*Sympathy for the Devil*, by Michael Mewshaw, and *In Bed With Gore Vidal*, by Tim Teeman), he's been the subject of two major documentaries in the last three years, *The United States of Amnesia* and *Best of Enemies*—the second of which, especially, would seem to suggest that Vidal will be best remembered as the man who shattered, on national television, the tic-ridden but otherwise serene composure of his ideological opposite, William F. Buckley Jr.

**VIDAL WAS A MAN** of infinite irony, but on some bedrock level his ambitions were deadly serious and sometimes noble. That he was expected to do great things was never in doubt. As a boy he was the constant companion of his maternal grandfather, Thomas Pryor Gore, the blind senator from Oklahoma whose staunch isolationism would have an enduring and somewhat curious influence on Vidal. His father, Gene, an Olympic decathlete and pioneering aviator, taught his son how to fly a plane and served as an affable counterbalance to the boy's wayward mother, Nina, a self-absorbed alcoholic whom Vidal would later, reductively, claim to hate. As fate would have it, Vidal's own grotesque dotage—as his protective facade of cool, elegant irony began to dissolve in liquor—left him resembling his mother more than ever.

His long, brilliant career arguably began as a desperate effort to stand on his own feet and be shut of Nina forever. Rather than join his Phillips Exeter classmates at Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, Vidal began writing a novel at age 19, *Williwaw* (1946), based on his World War II experience as first mate of an Army supply ship in the Aleutians. Within two years he became famous, after a fashion, when he published his third novel, *The City and the Pillar*, a succès de scandale with a gay protagonist. The arch-philistine *New York Times* reviewer, Orville Prescott, was allegedly so offended that he made sure Vidal's books were henceforth not to be mentioned in the daily edition. Ever resourceful, Vidal wrote a number of mystery novels under such pseudonyms as Edgar Box and Katherine Everard (named after a gay bathhouse), before finding a more lucrative calling as a television scriptwriter. “Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven,” he remarked of this era, echoing Milton's Satan, though the motto of the Wise Hack (as Vidal called a composite of his more seasoned screenwriting colleagues in his essay, “The Ashes of Hollywood”) was more to the point: “Shit has its own integrity.”

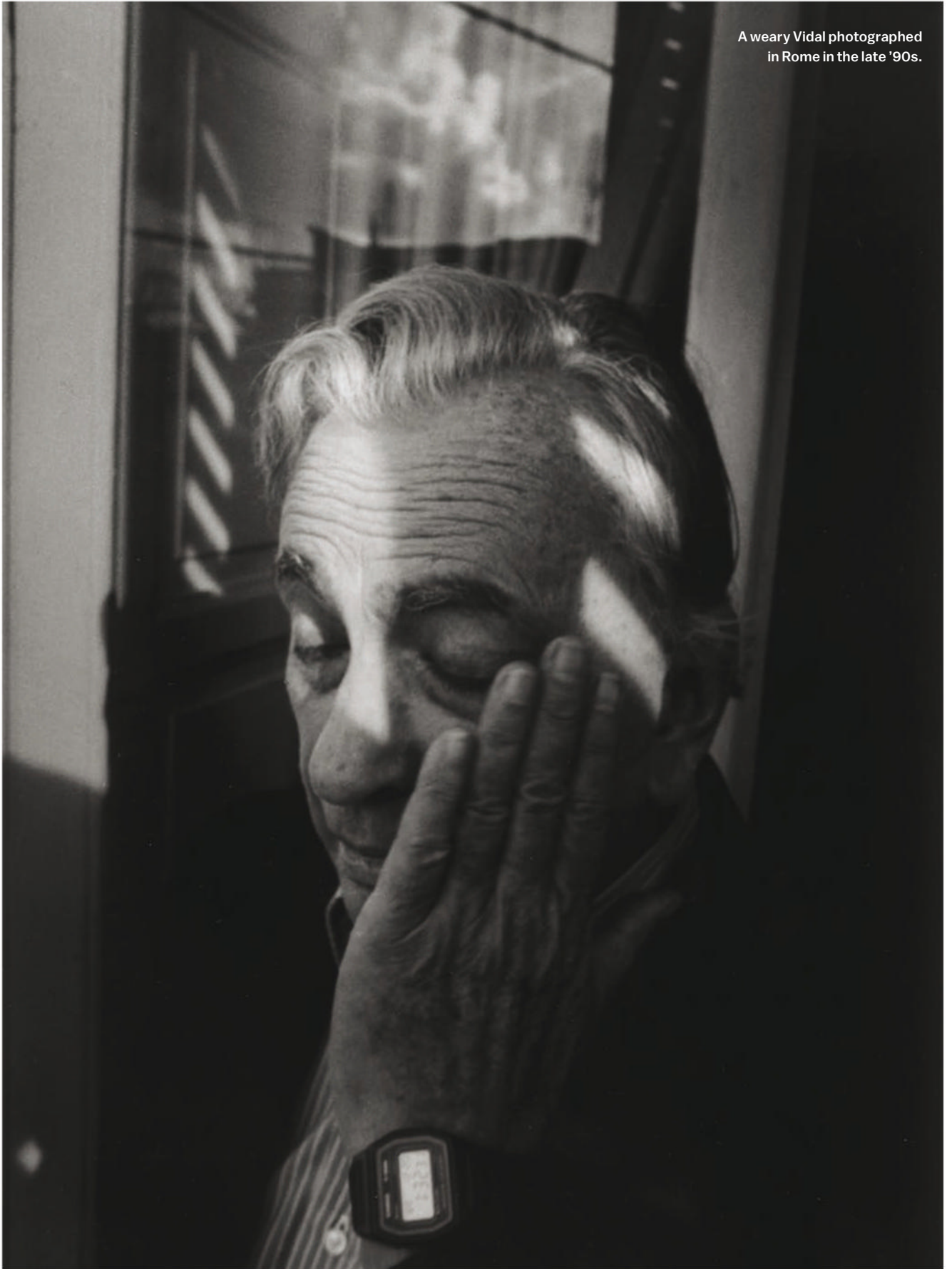
Vidal was at his best and worst as a political pundit and sometime candidate. In 1960, as the hospitable (and louche) proprietor of a Greek Revival mansion in Dutchess County, New York, he ran for Congress on a platform of taxing the wealthy, and, to his lifelong gratification, outpolled his friend Jack Kennedy in that strongly Republican district. In 1982, he ran for the U. S. Senate in California. On the surface these



**EMPIRE OF SELF: A LIFE OF GORE VIDAL**  
BY JAY PARINI

Doubleday, 480 pp., \$35

A weary Vidal photographed  
in Rome in the late '90s.



campaigns would seem quixotic at best, but Vidal was earnest in his ambitions and piqued at the people's failure to choose the best man. "There is not one human problem that could not be solved," he declared, "if people would simply do as I advise." What he advised ranged from the well-considered (especially in his more temperate essays) to the far-fetched and downright crackpot. He obsessed over the "national security state," which had transformed the republic, he believed, into a militaristic empire both morally and financially bankrupt. Fair enough. Nor was he alone in promoting the dubious claim that FDR had allowed the bombing of Pearl Harbor to proceed as a pretext for pushing the country into war. But as Vidal grew more paranoid, alcoholic, and shrill—not to say desperate for

**"When I come into this room in the morning to work," Vidal explained, "I like to be reminded of who I am."**

attention—he defended Timothy McVeigh as "a noble boy," and almost predictably (by then) insinuated that President Bush had colluded in the September 11 attacks. Parini, for the most part, is careful to place such excesses into context, rightly emphasizing that a more lucid, objective side of Vidal "was able to lift his discourse above the petty" and write such astute historical epics as *Burr* (1973) and *Lincoln* (1984), perhaps the best of his Narratives of Empire, the seven novels that chronicle our nation's descent into its present decadence.

**PARINI IS THE** author of balanced, readable biographies of Robert Frost and others, as well as an acclaimed novel about Tolstoy, *The Last Station* (1990), and how he came to this particular folly is an interesting story he relates in his introduction. When it became apparent, in the early '90s, that the critic Walter Clemons was unlikely to finish his Vidal biography because of ill health, Vidal approached his friend Parini with the project. Given their warm but fraught relationship ("I was looking for a father, and he seemed in search of a son," Parini tells us on page two), and quite aware that the living Vidal would be happy only with the purest virtuosity and adulation, Parini tossed this hot potato to his worthy colleague, Fred Kaplan. Parini describes Kaplan's book, *Gore Vidal: A Biography* (1999), as "sturdy and intelligent," while also suggesting that it was something less than a page-turner and had displeased its subject immensely. Meanwhile Parini went his own way Vidal-wise, occasionally conducting interviews (as early as 1988) for a book of his own, and temporizing vis-à-vis his friend and father-surrogate until

the man was safely tottering on the lip of the grave. "So write the book," Vidal said, once Parini had finally committed himself, "and do notice the potholes. But, for God's sake, keep your eyes on the main road!" Parini has been true enough to this desideratum, but I also think it's fair to say that both Kaplan's and Parini's books are of a kind that Vidal himself would have savaged—the one as a numbing regurgitation of "scholar-squirrel" data, the other as hackneyed and lazy, and both (perhaps the keenest bodkin for Vidal) as humorless.

Humor, of course, is not just a matter of cracking jokes but a mode of understanding, all the more so when it comes to understanding Vidal and bringing him to life on the page. We never lose sight of Boswell's admiration for his friend Dr. Johnson, even as the Great Cham's laughable grossness (the lopsided wig, the bug-eyed gluttony) is evoked with such loving, firsthand particularity. As for Parini, he precedes his chapters with "suggestive vignettes" about his more memorable encounters with Vidal. What is mainly (if obliquely) suggested in these vignettes, however, is a kind of wistful exasperation on Vidal's part toward his solemn, well-meaning protégé. "It's a tragedy to see a man who could leap in the air in such a state," Parini remarks to Vidal of a fellow dinner guest, Rudolf Nureyev, then dying of AIDS—whereupon Vidal "shakes his head, unhappy with [Parini's] truism, offered as a way to fill an awkward silence." Perhaps Vidal foresaw that his future biographer would be apt to write that same truism as cold, deliberate prose on the previous page of this very vignette: "It's sad to see this wasted body occupied by someone who had leaped so high in his prime."

What indeed did these two laugh about? Take the matter of Vidal's florid sexuality—about which Parini's grappling is akin to that of a greengrocer trying to fathom the uses of a speculum. "He certainly liked the idea of being bisexual," Parini writes, going on to point out that a "note of self-hatred" is evident in Vidal's tendency to refer to gay men as "'fags' and 'degenerates,' although he claimed to do so affectionately." I doubt that "affectionately" is the right word, or the word Vidal used, though perhaps he thought it unnecessary to explain that such camp deprecation is mostly intended to mock the squares who mouth such slurs as a matter of course. In any event, Parini comes back to the theme eleven pages later, by which time Vidal has gone from wishfully bisexual to wishfully straight: "He never acted like a gay man," Parini assures us—meaning he didn't mince or lisp in any conspicuous way?—and adds: "He thought of himself as a heterosexual man who liked to 'mess around' with men." As if sensing the reader's confusion, Parini takes another swing at it 20 pages later: "Gore wrestled with his sexual identity, unhappy about it, never quite willing to acknowledge he was 'gay,' a term he despised." Finally, after another 30 pages, he shambles full circle to his original claim that Vidal, by his own lights, was bisexual: "Yet his primary attachment to men, and to 'trade,' puts him mainly in the gay camp, however much he protested against such categorizing."

But anyway: Why not simply let Vidal speak for himself? His personal ambivalence about being branded as one thing



Buckley (left) and Vidal during one of their famously contentious debates: “Vipers, coiled and ready to strike.”

or another—there are “homosexualist” *acts*, he claimed, but no such thing as a homosexual per se—is reflected in his own abundant writings on the subject. These are tortured enough, to be sure, but they are sweet reason itself next to Parini’s repetitious murk. Meanwhile, as a public figure, Vidal’s stands on the issue were unfailingly brave and straightforward: “The difference between a homosexual and a heterosexual is about the difference between somebody who has brown eyes and somebody who has blue eyes,” Vidal said in a 1967 CBS documentary, facing down a grim Mike Wallace.

**WHEN A WRITER** indulges in sloppy thinking, for whatever reason, the writing goes to pot, too. A good copy editor will warn authors when they step too close to the cliché line, but I imagine Parini’s editor throwing up her hands around page eight or so. Like a breathless press agent, Parini likes to describe things that excite him in terms of their sparkle—“This trashy but entertaining and sparkling novel”; “It was a glittering occasion, with

numerous movie stars”—though he likes wind similes even more: “*Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell rushed like a tornado across the country”; “*Streetcar Named Desire* had swept the theater world like a hurricane”; “Fear moved like the wind in a forest.” And so on.

Perhaps the most well-known episode of Vidal’s public life were his televised debates with Buckley—“a pairing made in television heaven,” writes Parini—during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. To a startling degree Parini manages, with a kind of ham-fisted legerdemain, to drain this great matter of its inherent drama, historical resonance, and psychological nuance. I was happy to see a number of factual howlers in the advance galley of Parini’s book corrected in a later version, but nonetheless one is advised to consult Kaplan’s biography—in this case particularly—both for the sake of basic accuracy and to get a better idea of the big picture.

For now I’ll focus only on Parini’s treatment of the actual clash between Vidal and Buckley. “They confronted each other like vipers, coiled and ready to strike,” he inimitably sets the stage, careful to point out that Buckley was the more viperish of the two, or rather a kind of cat-snake: “feline, a slithering presence, with his tongue flicking, his eyes leering.” As any remotely curious person knows in this age of YouTube, the money part of the debates (897,570 views as of this writing) came when Vidal called Buckley a “pro- or crypto-Nazi,” whereupon Buckley became viperish in earnest, calling Vidal a “queer” before ten million viewers and threatening to punch him in the face. When a nervous Howard K. Smith tried to remonstrate, Buckley said, “Let the author of *Myra Breckinridge*”—Vidal’s recent best-seller about a transsexual—“go back to his pornography and stop making any allusions of Nazism.” Or, as Parini sees fit to record it: “Buckley added with a wicked glare: ‘Go back to your [sic] pornography.’” But *what* pornography? We are left to surmise as much in Parini’s version, since he misquotes perhaps the most famous line from one of the most famous moments in Vidal’s life.

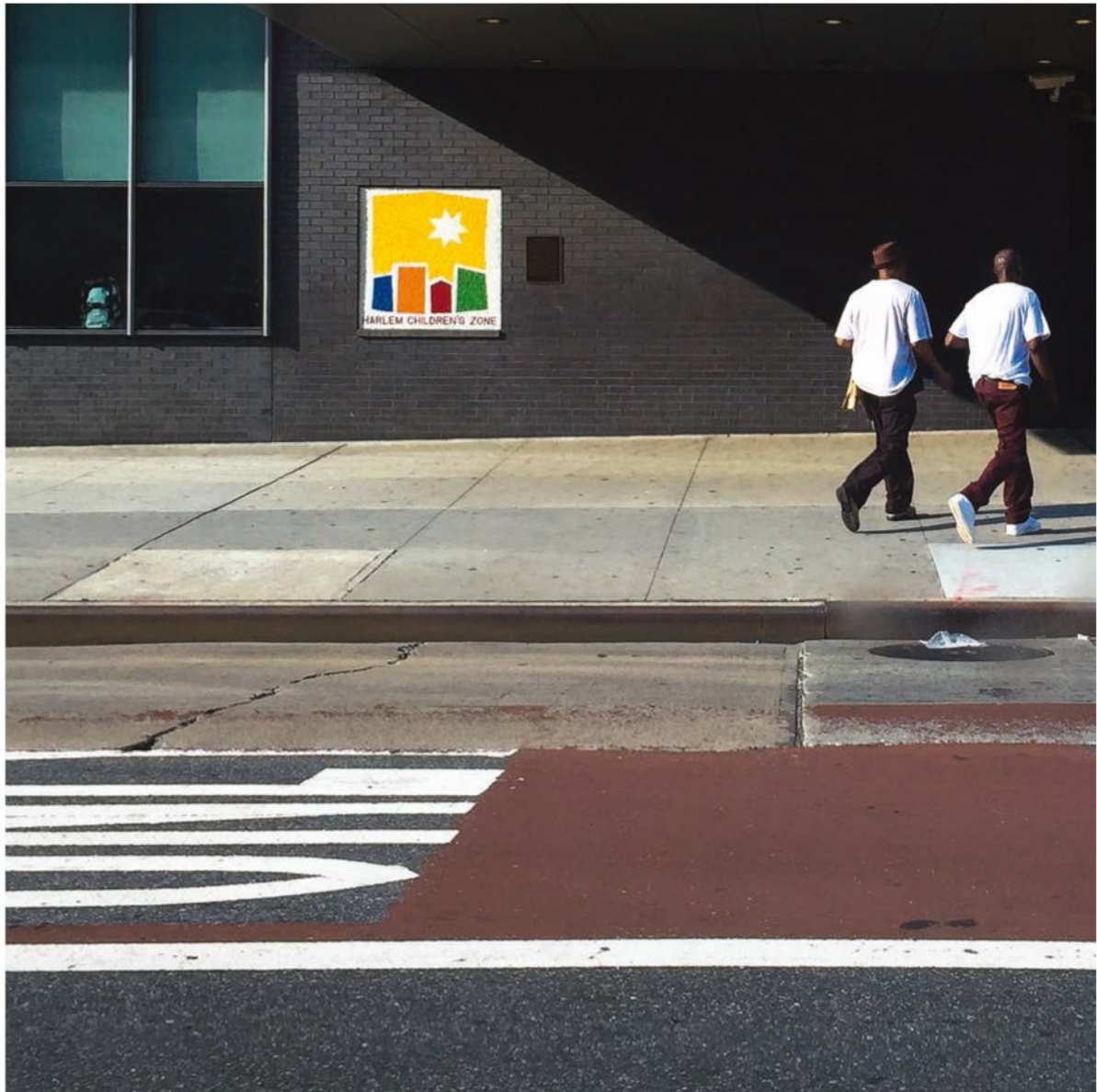
As for Vidal’s sad last years, the best account may be found in Michael Mewshaw’s mordantly perceptive memoir about his friend, *Sympathy for the Devil*, published in January this year. (It bears mentioning that both Parini and I provided blurbs for this book.) Mewshaw captures more vividly the decrepit gargoyle Vidal became after the death, in 2003, of his beloved partner of more than 50 years, Howard Austen, the one person who could stifle his more embarrassing rants. Certainly Austen might have urged him to skip being interviewed by Sacha Baron Cohen’s rude-boy persona, Ali G, who affected to mistake him for Vidal Sassoon (“You is also a world-famous hairstylist.”)

But let us end respectfully. Vidal’s life was a tragedy whose great themes put one in mind of *Citizen Kane*: the story of an insatiable egoist who had everything and lost it. Standing on his balcony in Ravello, overlooking the gorgeous coast, a friend asked him what more he could possibly want out of life: “I want to make 200 million people change their minds,” Vidal replied. 🐉

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## backstory

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHAWN THEODORE



**LOCATION** Madison and 5th, Harlem, New York

**DATE** July 10, 2015

**HARLEM IS, AS** photographer Shawn Theodore sees it, caught between two opposing forces: the fading heart of black American culture and an emerging district of renovated brownstones and flashy new businesses. Between 2000 and 2010, the neighborhood, which has been majority black since 1930, has seen the number of white residents double, and in recent years the median rent has skyrocketed. Today, Theodore says, pedestrian traffic in Harlem is divided by “the places where white folks are going and the places where black folks are going.”

This story is not unique to New York City. Gentrification has also been changing the face of Philadelphia (where Theodore

is based), Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., as well as other American cities. Each is perched on the cusp of what is development for some—erasure for others.

As black residents move out of their traditional neighborhoods, Theodore aims to connect—and memorialize—in his ongoing series, *The Avenues*, a shared, and disappearing, diaspora of somber street corners, brightly colored corner shops, and Sunday church hats. 📷

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SEE MORE OF SHAWN THEODORE'S *THE AVENUES* ON INSTAGRAM @NEWREPUBLIC.

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